



THE JESSE JAMES STORIES

ORIGINAL NARRATIVES OF THE JAMES BOYS

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 7.

Price, Five Cents.



BY
W.B. LAWSON

THE BOLD OUTLAWS STRODE THROUGH THE CROWD AND NOT A HAND WAS RAISED TO PREVENT THEM.



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JESSE JAMES, RUBE BURROWS & CO.

A Thrilling Story of Missouri.

By W. B. LAWSON.

CHAPTER I.

THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE.

The darkness of night had swept over the Missouri hills, and a peculiar gloom hung upon the wild landscape.

A storm rumbled in the distance, the muttering thunder advancing to a loud grumble that was almost a roar, and anon dying away far beyond the mountainous range, like the onset and retreat of an enemy.

Through the darkness, under the trees where the wind soughed weirdly, making quaint music, a man was groping his way.

Such was the density of the gloom that he would never have been able to have kept on in a direct line but for an object ahead which served as a beacon.

This at first glance might have been taken for a star, but as the heavens were overcast, such a thing was out of the question.

It must be a light.

There could be seen nothing of the flicker so peculiar

to a camp-fire, so it might be set down for certain that this gleam came from the window of some cottage or hut among the trees.

The party making his way through the dense woods kept his eyes upon this guiding light, and gradually diminished the distance separating him from it.

It really looked as though he must have some object in view, and that the light ahead had a positive connection with it.

In about twenty minutes he was able to make sure of the fact that the illumination proceeded from a cabin window.

The extreme caution he displayed gave warning that he expected to find enemies hereabouts.

His hand went to the pocket where he kept his faithful revolver, as if to make sure it was there.

Evidently he had come here with a purpose, and meant to make the most of it.

Creeping up still closer, he found that the window through which came the light was in such a position that to advance upon it he must expose himself.

Such a thing would be dangerous.

He inspected the conditions of the case, and made up his mind as to his course.

The roofs of the cabin was almost flat, and could be easily reached.

Without hesitation the prowler mounted.

Just as he clambered upon the roof in a way that gave evidence of much strength and agility, a door opened in the back of the cabin.

A flood of light illumined the yard.

A man came out.

Could he have heard the detective?

If he had, he must have attributed the sound to something else, for he soon entered the house and closed the door.

The man on the roof proceeded to carry out the design that had brought him there.

Groping around he discovered a trapdoor.

Perhaps he knew of its presence, or guessed the fact from instinct.

It was not tightly fastened, for a steady pull broke the cord that held it below, allowing him to draw it back.

Without any hesitation, the man lowered himself through the opening.

He found himself in a low loft, where he was compelled to stoop in order to keep his head from striking.

It was a ramshackle sort of place, trembling under the weight thus imposed upon it, and threatening to give way entirely.

What pleased him, however, was the fact that there were cracks and crevices in the floor, through which the light forced a way.

Little difficulty in spying upon those who might happen to be below.

Crouching down, the man glued eye and ear alternately to the largest crack nearby.

The result was fairly satisfactory.

He could hear much, and see something.

There seemed to be three men below, if he could judge from the variety of voices.

Before he had listened two minutes, he was able to locate each of them. One had the vocal organs of a bull, another spoke with a peculiar Southern twang in his voice, while the third spoke resolutely and clearly.

Evidently these three men had been conspiring together with some evil purpose in view.

He made this out with the first words he caught, and also the fact that he had probably arrived on the scene of action too late to get the full benefit of the particulars.

They had arranged their schedule, and each man knew the part he was to take.

The one whose voice bespoke him a leader appeared to occupy such a position now.

It was he who gave directions.

"Marden," he said to the man with the thunder tones, "you won't fail me?"

"I never did yet, Jesse James, and you kin depend on me at the right time. I like you, and I like your ways. This game suits me to a dot. I'm with you, dead sartin."

"And Rube, you understand your part?"

"I reckon I do, old man. You'll find Rube Burrows your right-hand bower when the time comes for pulling a trigger. I'm in on the haul every time."

Nice company this!

Those names were the most feared and detested along the Mississippi Valley.

Rube Burrows, though a young man, had made a notorious reputation for himself in Alabama, while for years, ever since the close of the war, Jesse James had ruled things with a high hand all through Missouri, where his reputation as a train and bank robber had made him a terror in the land.

Burrows had long sought to emulate the career of this man, and bade fair to equal him in his crimes.

He was not so cruel in his disposition as the other, but possessed a cunning mind that made him an object of alarm to the express company operating on Southern roads.

When two men of this caliber came together trouble was bound to ensue.

Flint and steel produce fire.

Rube Burrows had long desired to enter into some game with the old and more experienced train robber.

The chance had now come, and he was bent upon improving it.

Who was the man in the loft, and what brought him to such a rendezvous?

He was evidently not in sympathy with the object that had attracted the three conspirators.

On the contrary, he was one of their deadliest foes—being none other than Carl Whicher, the famous Pinkerton detective, who had more than once come within an ace of capturing Jesse James, thereby attaining a very high place in the opinion of the noted Missouri outlaw.

Chagrined at having arrived when their plans had all been discussed and arranged, he listened eagerly in the hope that he might hear something to at least give him a clew.

There are times when a hint is as good as a nod, and he could follow such a leader to its legitimate conclusion.

His eagerness to hear and see led him to push along to a point that was really dangerous.

The floor of the loft was old and rotten.

This cabin had seen many years, and during the war had been a noted rendezvous for the jayhawkers and

bushwhackers of Missouri, from whence they issued to carry terror to the hearts of their enemies.

Marden had been one of their number.

After the close of the war he had retired to the lonely wilds and lived a hermit life, seldom seeking civilization except when necessity compelled him to do so.

The first view the man in the loft obtained of this man was disappointing.

From the tremendous bellow of his voice, one would naturally expect him to be a giant in stature.

Such was not the case.

In fact, the reverse was true, for Marden proved to be a small, though thick-set, man.

Like most dwarfs, this man possessed immense power in his body and arms.

He could pick up an ordinary man and almost swing him around his head as though he were a baseball bat.

Being of a surly disposition, he was shunned by most men, which fact pleased the hermit just as well.

After several minutes' listening, during which he strived in vain to learn more of the details of what he was convinced was a dastardly plot, he cautiously withdrew from the loft as noiselessly as he had come.

He reached the ground safely, and was quickly swallowed up in the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER II.

A MEETING ON THE ROAD.

When Whicher left the hut in the Missouri hills, he set off at once for the nearest town.

What he had heard remained fixed in his mind indelibly.

He might have learned more, but half a loaf was better than no bread.

By adding one thing to another he could make out the whole case.

One object he had in life.

This was to defeat the plans of the three conspirators, and if possible, kill or capture the man who might be looked upon as their leader—the notorious Jesse James.

The first thing he did upon reaching town was to seek a tavern and satisfy his hunger.

When this job was through with he felt like a new man and was ready to grapple with the business on hand.

He began to make careless inquiries.

They were such as a stranger might ask, desiring to ascertain what the place could offer to a man with capital.

It boasted a bank, and quite a large sum of money was handled at times in this institution, which fact the three men had learned.

It was their intention to rob the bank.

Besides this they had another scheme on foot which had interested the detective.

He took a stroll about town.

Having been careful enough to disguise himself, he did not fear meeting any one of the three men, should they happen to be in the place.

Calling at the bank to get a bill changed, he noted how the land lay there.

As he was a stranger, more than one person eyed him curiously, as though they would like to know what his business might be.

Whicher kept his own counsel.

He meant to play this game in his own way, and not to call in assistance until the proper time came.

Making inquiries, he headed out of town for the house of a gentleman by the name of Allen.

On the way fate played him a curious deal.

He had hired a horse, preferring to ride.

While jogging along under the trees and enjoying the beauties of the landscape, he suddenly heard the thunder of horses' hoofs ahead.

The first, indeed the only thought that crossed his mind, was to the effect that some animal was running away.

Just beyond, the road made a turn.

Around the trees that marked this bend he saw a horse appear, tearing along.

Mounted upon it was a young girl.

She seemed to be clinging to the animal in an agony of fear; at least, that was the impression Carl had when he saw her hair flying in the wind created by her swift passage.

He could also hear the thud of other hoofs around the bend, and presumed some one was endeavoring to overtake the runaway steed.

On his way hither the detective had passed some ugly stretches of road, where a deep gully yawned beside it.

The horse was apt to lose his footing there, and go down in a heap, bearing its fair rider to almost certain death.

Carl was a man of prompt action.

We have already had occasion to know this.

Like lightning he realized that the only chance of saving this fair unknown, lay with his promptness.

The horse he bestrode was but an ordinary one, yet some men can get more speed out of an animal than others.

Carl was such a horseman.

He knew he could not keep up with the fast-flying bay, or overtake that animal if once passed, but there was another way of accomplishing the same thing.

Turning his steed he urged him on, and began to run in the same direction as the horse ridden by the girl.

At the same time the latter was overhauling him without difficulty.

Carl cast one glance back over his shoulder.

His attention, of course, was mainly taken up with the girl, but he had an indistinct view of a man mounted on a black charger, and rushing along in pursuit, about thirty yards behind the fast-flying bay.

Carl had already made up his plans.

He knew what he was about.

This would not be the first time by a long shot that he had stopped a runaway horse, although never before under the same circumstances that existed at present.

The road was narrow.

In order to pass him by, the mare must come within arm's reach on either side, for he occupied the middle.

As he hoped and expected, the horse came up on his left.

He saw its head just back of him, and forging on, steadily passing.

Now was his time.

Carl suddenly leaned over in his saddle, and clutched the bridle near the bits.

Once his firm hand closed over this, nothing could make him relax his hold.

At the same time he drew heavily upon the lines of his own steed, reducing his pace.

The result was as expected.

Both animals were brought to a halt.

Carl, flushed with victory, turned to receive the warm thanks of the maiden whom he had, as he believed, saved from possible death.

What he saw amazed him.

She sat erect in her saddle, and from her eyes blazed the fire of indignation.

The small whip she carried was raised on high, and Carl half expected to feel its lash across his face.

"Take your hand from that bridle! How dare you stop me, sir?" she cried.

Carl would never forget the mingled anger and pathos in that voice—it sent a sympathetic chord vibrating in his heart.

He realized that somehow he had made a mistake.

"I beg your pardon, lady, but I thought your horse had become unmanageable, and was running away with you," he said.

At the same time he removed his hand.

Just at this moment the other rider thundered up, and Carl saw a handsome man, older than himself, wearing a black scowl upon his face, which, however, just now was partially relieved by a smile of devilish triumph.

Carl disliked him on sight.

The man fastened his eyes upon the face of the young girl in a gloating way.

"Aha! you thought to give me the slip that time, Susie, but you see fate steps in and takes a hand in the game. I hope you will change your mind now," he said.

She flashed defiance at him.

"I refuse to ride home with you, Major Prentice, after the manner in which you have addressed me. I consider you no gentleman, sir."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah! you will perhaps have reason to change your mind, Miss Susie. I simply prove to be a bold wooer. I understand the ladies love such a man, who, having made up his mind, can be daunted by nothing."

"Some women may, but I prefer a gentleman at all times. When I marry I hope to have a husband, and not a master," she replied, with a spirit that Carl greatly admired.

"And you are perfectly right, my dear girl. In me you would find a devoted slave."

"Pardon me, I do not care to discuss the subject at all, and much less in the presence of a third party," she said, coldly.

"As you please. If you are ready we will continue our ride home."

"I said I preferred to ride alone, sir."

"Nonsense, you will allow me to accompany you. These roads are hardly safe nowadays, with so many strangers around."

Carl took this to himself.

He touched his hat.

"Lady, I was the innocent cause of your being overtaken. Accept my sincere apology, and allow me to remedy the blunder as well as I am able. If you would prefer to let me be your cavalier to your home I shall see to it that this gentleman does not annoy you with his attentions."

"Sir!" exclaimed the major, frowning in a savage manner, and dropping his hand to his hip in a suggestive manner that those living in the South fully understand.

He had met his match, however.

Carl looked him straight in the eye.

"I know your kind, sir. Any man who would use violence toward a lady is a bully. Ay, scowl as you please; looks do not alarm me. If you wish anything more I am ready to accommodate you. I have met braver men than you ere now at the muzzle of the revolver."

They glared at each other as though recognizing mortal foes.

Carl was in the right.

He knew it, and the consciousness gave him additional strength of purpose.

Perhaps he also felt the eyes of the fair girl fastened upon him, and this may have caused his heart to take on additional determination.

At any rate it was the major who finally withdrew his gaze.

Muttering a curse he whirled his horse around.

"You will hear from me again, you impudent cur!" he grated between his teeth, at the same time urging his steed on.

The words were flung back over his shoulder, and the gallant major, as if fearful lest the other should take a notion to send a bullet after him, bent low in the saddle.

Carl was not in the habit of shooting at flying men—he only laughed as he watched the coward careering down the road.

Perhaps to himself he was thinking that there was quite a contrast between himself and the ungallant major, and he may have been human enough to have gloried in the fact that the witness of the encounter, the one most interested in the game, was the young girl.

He turned in the saddle.

CHAPTER III.

AN IMPENDING STORM.

He found a pair of roguish blue eyes fastened upon him.

The girl was not a beauty, but she possessed a very attractive face and figure, and Carl Whicher was a bachelor.

Therefore, he was deeply interested at once.

"You have routed the enemy, sir," she said, with a clear laugh that seemed to break down the barriers of reserve between them.

Carl echoed it.

"Yes, he seems to be in full retreat, and I don't think we need expect any trouble from that source, for the present, at least."

"I thank you for your kindness."

"Don't mention it. Only for my awkward blunder you would never have been overtaken by him. I only remedied it as best I could."

"Still, you braved his anger. There are few men in this section who would do that," she remarked, looking at him fixedly, as though searching for the hidden power that had enabled him to come out victor in the exchange of glances.

"What! afraid of that man? Why, he is a coward, if ever there was one."

"He has the reputation of a fire-eater. I half expected to see him attempt your murder in cold blood. As it is, I regret that you should have made an enemy of him."

"Why?"

"He will give you trouble in the future."

"Let him try. Two can play at that game. I have

defeated better men than he before. But I sincerely trust your troubles in connection with him are over, miss."

A sad look shut down over her face.

"I am afraid that would be too good to be true, sir. Major Prentice has the reputation of being an obstinate man; you heard him declare that fact himself. He will not give up an object so easily."

"The wretch. Some one ought to horsewhip him within an inch of his life. Do you mean he will persecute you with his attentions when he knows they are disagreeable?"

She nodded her head.

"Have you no brother upon whom you can call, to give this man his due?"

A negative shake answered him.

"Your father?"

"Is living."

"In good health?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Why don't you tell him of this man's persecutions, and ask his protection?"

"There are two reasons. In the first place, I am afraid of the major. He has been concerned in so many duels, and come out first best, that I fear lest he should do father injury."

"Then again; I know father is in the power of this unscrupulous man—I have seen it in a dozen ways—he writhes under it, and groans to feel the iron collar about his neck, but it remains."

"The same old story, eh?"

"Yes. I do not know what it is this man holds over him; not a money matter, for we are well-to-do. But he makes his power felt."

"Pardon my question, but does your father insist upon your acceptance of this man?"

"As yet it has not come to that. He has only let matters go on, and puts in a good word at times, although I can see it nearly chokes him. I do not know what it will all come to," with a deep sigh and a weary look.

Carl saw his chance.

"Would you let me help you?"

She threw him an arch glance.

"You have already done so."

"Then let that be my claim for further recognition. I may be able to do you more of a service than you think."

"But it is hardly fair to draw you, a stranger, into trouble."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I reckon I'm in it already, since I have made an enemy out of that man. It won't matter much if I go in a little deeper."

His eyes met hers.

Something in his frank admiration caused a blush to creep over her face.

Carl thought she looked beautiful then.

"I cannot say no. Friends are too few in this section of the country, and you have already rendered me a great service. You must come and meet my father."

"With pleasure, miss, when I have concluded some business that has brought me out of town. You have lived here long?"

They were riding along side by side while thus conversing.

"All my life," she replied.

"That would not mean a great span," he said, gallantly, and then continued: "Perhaps you could aid me in finding a party."

"Does he live near by?"

"I have reason to believe so, although my information was not positive."

"I know every one for five miles around. Since childhood I have galloped over this country on horseback."

"Ah! then you must know Squire Allen."

She started, and looked at him quizzically.

"Am I correct?" he asked.

"Yes, indeed."

"You know him?"

"Very well indeed," smiling.

"He lives near you?"

"Oh, no! he lives with me."

"What! Squire Allen is——"

"My father," bowing and laughing.

The detective had received something of a shock, but it was not the mere surprise of her intelligence that affected him.

He regarded her seriously.

"I understand it all now," he said, slowly, but did not offer to explain his meaning.

"If you wish to see my father, that will be a good excuse for bringing you home. We are not more than a mile from the place now."

"I am glad it is so. You will allow me to accompany you now."

"I cannot help myself," archly.

So they rode along and conversed.

Each seemed to be greatly interested in the other, and it began to look as though the hand of fate must have directed this chance meeting on the road.

Before long they came to the home of the young girl.

Squire Allen's place was well known, as he had always been a man of wealth and taste.

During the war reverses had come to him, but he had made up for them since.

Although he had lost two sons in the Confederate service, he was not a rabid hater of the North, and could see

far enough in the future to prophesy some of the wonderful things that would come upon the New South, when Yankee capital and enterprise gained a footing there.

He welcomed Carl warmly.

When he learned that the gentleman had been of assistance to his child he became even more friendly, though he did not ask what the nature of the obligation might be, and Susie had no great desire to tell him.

Carl meanwhile studied him.

He was endeavoring to analyze the man and see what stamina he had.

The business he had with Squire Allen was of a peculiar nature.

It concerned his daughter.

The more Carl pondered over the matter, the stronger grew his belief that it was something more than mere chance that had thus thrown them together.

He believed in destiny.

It was very pleasant to build air castles, too, when Susie Allen was to be associated with him in their construction.

The squire was a jolly man with a red face and portly figure.

One could imagine him in a red coat and mounted on a bobtailed nag, following the hounds across country, for he was the very picture of an old English squire.

Although he appeared so good-natured and happy, the detective had keen eyes and he could read deep down below the surface.

There was trouble there.

Something rested heavily on the mind of the owner of Woodstock, as he called his place in memory of Walter Scott's romance in the days of Cavaliers and Roundheads.

As Carl had already been given a hint by the daughter, he knew what was in the wind.

It was an incubus the squire carried on his back, in the shape of the load piled upon him by Major Prentice.

Carl was in no hurry.

He did not know how his information would be received, and it was even possible that when he came to speak against the major he would be shown the door.

It was too pleasant there in that society to be in any haste to change it.

Besides, he desired to know his man.

Such congenial natures grow together in a very short time.

Both of them were extravagantly fond of gun and rod—the sportsman's free masonry brought them together as nothing else would.

Soon they were swapping great fish stories, all vouched for as true.

When men reach this point it may be set down as certain that they will not quarrel.

Noon came.

Dinner was announced by a black major-domo, who would have done credit to a Southern plantation under the old regime.

Carl was invited.

He would have protested, but one look from the blue eyes of Susie Allen already had more influence with him than all the squire's bellowing.

So he remained.

It was his intention to seize the first favorable opportunity now to inform his genial host why he had sought him.

There was a certain amount of reluctance about this, too, as he was not yet certain just how the old man would take it.

Perhaps he would denounce him as a good-for-nothing interloper, meddling with affairs that did not concern him.

At any rate this had to be done, and the time was passing.

Dinner was served in style.

Perhaps the squire would ask him to have a smoke at its conclusion, and over the cigars men generally become very friendly.

That would be an opportune time to speak.

They were quite a merry party, and Susie looked very sweet and domestic behind the coffee urn—for the squire insisted upon having this American beverage at every meal.

Carl was badly smitten.

He had been about to carry out his plans before on account of principle.

Now he had some interest at stake.

Susie was a prize worth winning.

The man who succeeded in getting her would be an envied fellow.

He admitted this.

Perhaps she had a lover already.

It would be one of his first duties to ascertain this fact as soon as possible.

If such should prove to be the case he was man enough to desert the field at once, but should he find the race open Carl meant to enter without delay.

So he drifted on.

"My daughter generally sits with me while I smoke my after-dinner cigar," said the squire, reaching after a box.

Susie arose.

"You must excuse me to-day, papa, as I have something to attend to. I will see you on the piazza later."

And she left the room.

"Come, let us adjourn to the piazza."

Soon they were comfortably fixed, and alone.

Carl made sure of this fact.

He had arranged his chair near that of the old gentleman. Both men had their feet elevated on the railing, American style.

"I have something to tell you, squire."

"Indeed. Please proceed."

"There is a shadow hanging over this house—a storm ready to burst upon your head."

CHAPTER IV.

PLOT AND COUNTERPLOT.

At these words the old squire naturally seemed very much astonished, and regarded his visitor in a peculiar manner, as though he had doubts regarding his sanity.

This was fully expected by Carl.

He had made up his mind what course to pursue, and was not to be balked by any ordinary difficulties.

Hence, he viewed the astonishment of the old gentleman with utter indifference.

"These are strange words, sir."

"Yes, they may appear so to you, but when I explain to you, you will understand better."

"Then do so at once!"

Carl had started the ball rolling now, and did not mean to let it stop until the bottom of the hill was reached.

At the same time he knew it was necessary that he should proceed cautiously, for the old man was more deeply concerned in the game than outward appearances indicated.

"Squire Allen, before I tell you my story, I wish to be assured that you will keep my secret inviolate. Will you promise me this?"

"With all my heart, young man, though I haven't the slightest idea as to what that secret can be."

"You will soon learn, sir. I am, by profession, a detective."

The squire started.

"One of Pinkerton's men!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, that is true."

"After the James boys?"

"Again you hit the bull's-eye. But I have a mission beyond the mere desire to win the reward offered for their bodies dead or alive."

Then he went on to tell of the murder of the detective by the outlaws in the mountains.

It was no news to the squire.

All Missouri had rung with it.

At the same time he listened with interest, for the man who related the story was one who had a great deal at stake.

Then Carl told of his hunt.

When he came to the scene in the cabin, his auditor

had shown such decided interest that he forgot to puff away at his cigar, which, in consequence, went out.

The squire turned scarlet in the face when he heard what the three desperadoes were engaged in discussing. Something came home to him.

With difficulty he repressed a groan.

Carl played his cards well, and knew just how far to go in the matter.

Finally he came to the encounter on the road, and painted Major Prentice in as black colors as a master-hand might.

This time the squire groaned outright—there was no mistake about it.

He understood that the young man knew his secret, and hung his head in shame.

Carl felt sorry for him.

"I beg you to believe, Squire Allen, that I have no desire to pry into your private affairs. It is my business to assist you if you will allow me.

"I understand that you are in the power of this villain; that he holds an influence over your head, and threatens you with disastrous consequences unless you do exactly as he desires.

"I do not ask you to tell me what this secret is, but would like to know whether you dare defy your enemy to do his worst."

The old man shuddered, and passed his hand across his brow.

He suffered keenly.

"I thought it might all come out well; that he was a gentleman, and Susie might grow to care for him. Then I would be spared the awful exposure."

"And now?"

"I shall defy him to do his worst. You have shown him to me as a villain, and an associate of train robbers and murderers. No matter what happens to me, my daughter must not be sacrificed to such a wretch. I repeat it—a thousand times, no!"

Carl took his hand and squeezed it.

"I honor you for those sentiments, sir, and stand willing to back you up against even the power of this lawless gang. It will be strange if together we cannot devise some means of defeating them."

His words seemed to put new life into the old squire.

A look of determination came over his face that boded no good for the man who was plotting his downfall.

"Young man, I trust you. Whether we win or fall, I place confidence in you. Advise me, and I will do what you say."

This was far better than Carl had ever anticipated.

Judging from the looks of the squire, he had believed there would be trouble in getting him to believe the facts.

At hearing the other's words he heaved a sigh of relief and seemed pleased.

"Let us look calmly at the matter, then, and see what these men intend doing. As I heard only a portion of what was said, it is necessary to supply the balance.

"The three men whom I overheard plotting in that cabin have, it seems, entered into an agreement to assist Prentice in his game.

"I do not know how much of a money consideration he paid them, but besides this it seems that Jesse James has a debt to cancel. Prentice did something for him once upon a time, and the opportunity has arrived when he can return the favor."

"And the method to be employed?"

"As far as I could make out, it is a singular one. This man desires to appear as a hero in the eyes of your daughter. He intends to rescue her from the power of the outlaws when they have captured her."

The squire laughed.

"Bless my soul, what a queer thing to think of such a plan. It would be a rough joke on the major if you should steal his thunder."

"Just what I propose doing," remarked Carl, quietly.

"What! d'y'e mean to say you'll take his place, and rescue Susie?"

"Exactly. It's a pity the plan should be entirely given up. Somebody ought to reap a benefit from it after all the trouble."

"You are right, young man, and I'm glad you are in the field. I like you—Susie likes you, as I have already seen, bless her dear heart. If you should learn that Squire Allen had once made a fool of himself, I don't believe you are the man to visit the father's sins upon the head of the innocent child."

Carl protested against such a thing.

"My respect for a young lady is based upon her own individual worth, and not what she may owe to her father."

"Gad! I like that. It has the ring of a true man about it. Major Prentice can go and do as he pleases; I'm not bound to bend the knee before him. Yes, I'll defy him."

"First of all, however, let us get what benefit we can out of his little game."

"True for you."

"You will leave it all in my hands?"

"Everything."

"And carry out my suggestions?"

"To the best of my ability."

"Good. We are bound to succeed. Now listen, while I roughly draw an outline of their brilliant scheme, and you will see where we can get in our work."

"There is one in your employ who is the paid spy of this major; can you guess who it may be? From the

way in which they spoke I should judge that it was a woman, and one with whom your daughter comes in daily contact."

The squire clenched his stout fist and brought it down upon the arm of his chair with a tremendous whack.

"Yes, I know who it is—a girl by the name of Dorothy—she owes us much, but it is the nature of her breed to be treacherous. She has black blood in her veins, though you would never believe it to look at her."

"She is the one they depend on to drug the young lady's tea to-night. She will be carried off by the three men. At a certain time she will come to her senses and naturally cry for help. With that Major Prentice is to spring from the bushes—a fight follows—the brave man kills or puts to flight all of her enemies after a desperate encounter, and, of course, the rescued maiden falls into the arms of her savior."

"Very fine, indeed, but we'll spoil the game for him—we'll spoil the game," muttered the squire, gritting his teeth and nodding his head in a resolute manner.

"You are right, sir, and now I'll tell you just how I purpose doing it."

"Go on, Carl."

"The major must be detained, and you are the one to hold him."

"I?"

"It is easily done. All that is necessary is that you give him a little of his own medicine."

"The deuce!"

"In other words, drug him."

"Can it be done?"

"He expects to spend the evening with you here, and I think you will have no trouble slipping this into a glass of wine."

The detective took something out of his pocket and handed it to the other.

It was a small vial, containing a few drops of liquid that looked like water.

The squire looked at it.

"Shall I use all of it?"

"Yes; I have regulated the dose. He will lie down on the way to the rendezvous, and when he awakens all will be over."

"If anything should happen to spoil this plan of yours?"

"Never fear. I will save your child at any rate. Instead of firing blank cartridges I can use lead, and there will be no mock shrieks after my firing is over."

"Ah! I see. This will be a grand opportunity for you to get your work in."

"Yes. The oath I took may be carried out before another morning."

They talked further.

The plan was looked at from all sides, and wherever improvement could be made it was suggested and acted upon.

Both were confident of success.

They knew the power of the combination against which they had to struggle.

A slip might be fatal.

For instance, if the three outlaws guessed the truth in any way, the young man would never live to tell the tale.

In the *mêlée* he would meet his doom—a bullet through his brain.

Carl knew all this.

He was willing to take the chances.

His profession had accustomed him to meeting the grim monster face to face and wrestling with him for the victory.

It was nothing new for him to go into battle holding his life in his hand.

When everything had been arranged, they changed the subject.

Susie joined them.

Thus several hours passed pleasantly, and they saw the sun drawing near the western hills.

Evening was not far away.

As he had already arranged with the old squire, Carl declared it positively necessary that he should go on.

He promised to see them soon again, and ventured to press Susie's hand at parting, which brought the blushes to her cheeks.

Then he galloped down the road.

Turning in the saddle, he saw a white kerchief fluttering at the gate, and answered the signal with a wave of his hat in the air.

"Bless the girl," he muttered, "she's taken me by storm. I'm ready to risk all I have, my life, for her sake."

CHAPTER V.

LYING IN WAIT.

Carl rode along for a short distance.

Coming to a bend in the road, he chanced to glance ahead, and saw approaching him a single horseman.

In this man he recognized his enemy.

Yes, it was Major Prentice on his way to the plantation of Squire Allen.

The shades of evening fell heavily under the trees at the point where Carl chanced to be at the time, and he was sure the other had not noticed him.

Obedying a sudden impulse he urged his horse in among the trees.

Screened by the undergrowth, he could see what passed along the road without himself being seen.

The major was passing by when his horse, scenting the other animal near, gave a neigh.

Carl knew what the result would be, but was powerless to prevent it.

His horse answered.

Instantly the doughty major drew rein, and turning in the saddle, glared long and earnestly in the direction whence the sound had come.

He held a revolver in his hand, and sat like a figure carved of stone in his saddle.

Carl believed he would move forward to investigate, and knowing what such a meeting meant, also drew his revolver.

It was a peculiar situation.

After a couple of minutes Major Prentice appeared to conclude that he did not care to investigate the source of the mysterious neigh.

He rode on.

As he galloped down the road, he still kept the revolver ready in his hand, and looked back over his shoulder, as though not quite certain that the person concealed under the trees did not mean to assail him.

Carl was glad a meeting had been avoided.

Not that he feared the man, for he despised him as a coward, but it was his wish that the original plan might be carried out, and he was willing to even go to some trouble in order to bring this about.

His hour of triumph would come when, in place of the drugged major, he rescued the young girl from her abductors.

He could wait.

Time brings its revenge for those who can be patient and endure all things.

Carl's next duty was to secrete his horse in a thicket far removed from the road.

Then he set to work making certain changes in his personal appearance.

In the daytime this would not have done any particular good, for even ordinary eyes could see through it, but during the hours of darkness he might easily be taken for the major by the latter's friends.

This was as he wanted it.

Back in the direction of the squire's house he made his way, screened by the darkness.

It was the detective's intention to oversee the work done, and make sure that Prentice swallowed the drugged wine.

He found a place where he could see, and watched the actions of those within, gazing at Susie with deepest admiration and on the major with malice in his heart.

She treated her admirer coldly, but in a ladylike manner.

The old squire also dissembled in a way that caused

the watching man to chuckle aloud, at times whacking the major on the back, and acting just as you would expect a jovial and good-natured old fellow to do.

When supper was over they adjourned to the drawing-room.

Carl had to also seek new quarters in order to watch.

He saw that Susie was very sleepily, and soon she excused herself.

This was evidence in itself that the drug was doing its duty—the maid was faithful to her masters, and had done their work.

After that the major seemed nervous.

He appeared anxious to leave.

Two or three times he made a move to go, but the squire clung to him and detained him in some way.

Finally he promised to let his guest depart if he would have a glass with him, to which the major readily agreed.

"I have some old stuff here that is worth its weight in silver."

Of course, when his back was turned to his guest, the squire dropped the contents of his vial into one glass.

Carl felt the cold perspiration ooze out on his brow.

An awful thought worried him.

What if the squire in his excitement should mix the glasses and imbibe the drugged liquor himself.

That would be a serious blunder.

It was to make dead sure of this matter that Carl had come back.

He meant to dog the steps of the major, even at the risk of discovery, until he had assured himself that the drug would work.

The two men clinked their glasses together and drained them.

After talking for a few minutes they shook hands and the major came out.

A colored boy held his horse.

He threw himself into the saddle, gave a loud laugh and cantered away.

Carl made for the road.

The stars were shining brightly, and he could see the elevated figure of the man on horseback, while concealed himself.

Should Prentice gallop away he would, of course, have difficulty in keeping up with him, although something of a grayhound in his way; but he imagined the other was not feeling in the humor for rapid progress, nor was there any need of his hastening to the rendezvous, since his confederates could not arrive for an hour or two.

Carl found no difficulty in keeping close behind his man.

He watched him closely, as well as the nature of the night allowed, hoping to see him reel in his seat.

Such a thing did not occur for some time.

The drug was slow in taking effect, but unless the squire had made a mistake in the glasses it was bound to get there.

Fortunately, Prentice was in no hurry.

He had plenty of time in which to reach the rendezvous, and this favored the man who was following.

At last he discovered the first indication that what he desired was coming to pass.

The man's head moved from side to side; he put up his hand as though dizzy.

Carl chuckled.

He felt satisfied that the game would turn in his favor soon.

In imagination he could see the chagrin that must come over the major when upon recovering from his stupor and hastening forward he discovered that the drama had already been played and another hero had taken his place.

The actions of the man on horseback grew even more pronounced.

He actually reeled in his saddle.

This became so serious that it could not last much longer.

Carl actually expected the man would drop from his seat.

Such a fear must have also come upon the major, for he suddenly reined in his horse with an oath.

It was his intention to slip down from the saddle, but his condition was so serious that he had some difficulty in doing it.

Enough sense remained, however, for him to secure the animal to a branch that hung conveniently near.

Then, still muttering to himself concerning this strange stupor that had come over him and which could not be resisted, he staggered some dozen paces away, groping about him.

His feet came in contact with a lot of leaves swept back of a fallen log, and with a grunt of intense satisfaction he dropped upon this impromptu couch.

That was the last of Major Prentice for at least several hours.

He had been outwitted.

Keen though this man might be, he had met his match. Carl crept near.

He could hear the regular breathing of the other, and knew he had passed the boundary line of deep slumber.

It would take an earthquake to arouse him now.

Carl had no desire to do it.

He bent over his sleeping enemy, and without much thought drew the other's revolver from his pocket, transferring it to his own person.

In this manoeuvre he had no particular object, save to

arm himself the more fully for his meeting with the three desperadoes.

When a man expects to cope with such masters of warfare as Rube Burrows and Jesse James, he cannot be in possession of too many weapons.

That was what Carl thought.

He had no further use of the man lying there, though perhaps believing it possible that he would see him again.

Such desperate characters are not gotten rid of so easily, especially when inspired by the passion miscalled love, such as had animated his actions thus far.

Before a great while Carl would have cause to regret taking that revolver.

This will be explained later.

His heart was filled with a double motive in the carrying out of the work placed before him.

First of all came the desire to be of service to Susie Allen.

Though he had known her only about twenty hours—indeed, much less than that—he had conceived an ardent affection for the squire's only daughter, and was ready to go to great trouble in order to win her favor.

Then, again, came the less commendable desire for revenge upon Jesse James because of the share the Missouri outlaw had taken in the death of his relative.

Leaving the slumbering man where he lay, Carl began to make his way through the woods toward the point selected as a rendezvous.

It was not far away.

He reached it in less than half an hour.

A bridle path led from the road to a small glade, and here the three outlaws were to be in camp when the major made his gallant assault upon them, rescuing the girl and carrying her heart by storm.

It was a pretty game.

The more he pondered over it the better Carl was pleased with his share.

Let the curtain ring up as soon as possible; he was prepared.

The way he would now down those men might surprise them.

They probably expected the major to fire above their heads, but the man who had taken his place would give them the benefit fair and square in the heart.

Carl felt as though he had been especially commissioned by the power of the law to avenge all the past crimes of these men who stood up and defied the authorities.

In other words, he was a public officer, empowered by the State to take these desperate men dead or alive, and as the latter was an utter impossibility, he had decided to do the former rather than back out.

That was why he crouched there in the bushes and

waited, with a smile on his set face and a revolver in his hand.

He had patience, all was well, no mistake had been made, and in time the game was sure to come to his net.

CHAPTER VI.

THE MOCK BATTLE.

Time passed.

Hearing no sounds to indicate the coming of the parties for whom he waited, Carl struck a match and consulted his watch.

It was eleven.

Surely they must be on the way and could not be far off.

He placed his ear to the ground and listened, as might an old frontiersman in days of old, when engaged in desperate encounters with the dusky sons of the forest.

Ah! success came.

He heard footsteps some distance away, and at about the same time caught the crashing of bushes, as though a party of men pushed hastily and carelessly along the bridle path.

As he sat up and listened he heard a deep voice gurgle an oath, and knew from this that the dwarf was there, having probably been struck in the face by a switch, springing back into place after the passage of his comrades.

They were coming, then.

Clear the deck for action and get ready to give them a surprise!

Carl's hand may have trembled a trifle from eagerness and excitement.

Fear had no place in his composition.

He was only anxious for the affair to get under way, so that he might give vent to some of the surplus animation that marked his actions.

It would soon come about.

The sounds drew closer.

He could hear the words uttered and even distinguish the voices.

"We must be near the place, Jesse?"

"Rube, a little more patience. It's close by."

"Looks like it here—this is a glade, and I reckon that big cottonwood stood thar."

"Yes, we've arrived at last, and I for one feel glad. This girl may seem a light load, but she's a dead weight. I wouldn't have done it for any one else than the major."

"Hush! I believe she's coming to. It would spoil the whole business to let her hear."

"Yes, yes. Come, hustle around and find some wood. We must have a fire here. The air is sharp enough for it, and besides, we want some light on the subject."

The dwarf made himself heard.

"Here is a fallen tree-top, dead enough for good fire-wood. Nearly scratched my eyes out among the branches," he cried.

Two of them began collecting twigs, which were piled in a heap.

Then a match was applied.

The flame started slowly, as the wood was partially wet from the rain that had fallen on the previous night.

When it once got headway, however, the fire showed great vitality, and lighted up the little glade thoroughly.

Carl was watching.

He saw that the young girl, wrapped in a cloak, had been laid near the base of the large cottonwood tree that marked the glade.

Looking at Jesse James, he noticed the man glancing around the border of the glade and knew what was in his thoughts.

The other wondered as to whether Major Prentice had arrived on the scene.

He must be reassured.

When he glanced in the direction of the spot where Carl lay, the detective raised himself above the bushes, and made a movement with his arm.

He was seen.

Jesse James answered the signal.

He really believed it was the major who crouched behind the bush.

That was the first link in the chain of deception which Carl had forged and meant to palm off upon his enemies.

The balance would soon come.

He immediately sank down out of sight again, and resumed his watch of the scenes that were transpiring in the glade.

The fire now sparkled, the flames writhing among the branches fed to them like fiery serpents, bent upon devouring everything within their reach.

Ah! there was a movement in the quarter where the girl lay.

She stretched out her hand, and seemed to be feeling for something.

Then she raised her head.

A pair of widely distended eyes stared at her surroundings, and a cry of alarm burst from her lips.

"Heaven help me—I dream. Where am I—what does this mean? Father! Save me!" and she covered her face with her hands.

Rube Burrows strode up.

His fierce appearance was apt to strike dismay to the heart of any gentle woman, and yet in reality there was nothing more to fear from this man than many another with a far less ferocious face.

He boasted of his gallantry to the fair sex, and that his

hand was never raised against a woman, bad as he might otherwise be.

"Don't take on so, Susie. We've got you a prisoner, to be sure, but you ain't goin' to be hurt. The governor's got to come down handsomely with the rocks, that's all."

"It will kill my poor father," she sobbed.

"I reckon not. The old squire's too tough for that. We're men of our word—this here is Jesse James, and I'm Rube Burrows. Reckon you've heard tell of us."

She seemed almost overcome at the exposure of their identity.

The reputation of these outlaws was enough to strike terror to the heart of any one so unfortunate as to fall into their power.

No doubt both of them had been credited with many deeds they were innocent of.

Such is the price that either fame or notoriety must pay.

Susie Allen was rendered almost hysterical by her sudden and terrible awakening.

She was a brave girl, but the drug must have had an influence upon her.

At any rate, she sprang to her feet, giving a cry of alarm that pierced the heart of the man hiding in the bushes, who gloried in the thought that his hour had come.

"Heaven help me, if I am in the power of the fiends you name. Better death than that. Have you no pity, wretches? Unhand me—let me go from this place back to my home!"

She tore herself loose from the grasp of Jesse James, and would have fled, but with a laugh intended to still further chill her blood, Rube Burrows caught her arm.

Again she shrieked in terror.

"Help! help! Oh! my soul, is there no one to save me from these awful men?"

Ah! a crashing in the bushes announced the arrival of some one.

The outlaws uttered exclamations of surprise, and flashed weapons into view.

A man sprang into the glade.

Apparently it was Major Prentice.

He stood there like a Nemesis, glaring at the three men.

"What does this mean? I heard calls for help, and in a lady's voice. If you devils are up to any mischief it will be a sorry night's work for you."

"Oh! Major Prentice, save me!" cried Susie, falling into the common error, thanks to Carl's ingenuity in disguising himself.

"Heavens! Miss Susie, can I believe my eyes! Have these wretches dared to harm you?"

He took out a revolver—it chanced to be the one se-

cured from Prentice—which accident was of great moment to several parties in that same little glade.

"No, no, they have not harmed me, but they mean to hold me for ransom. Oh! save me, Major Prentice, if you are a man. I will forget everything—do not desert me!" she pleaded.

She would have run to him, only that Rube still grasped her wrist, and she could not free herself from his desperate clutch.

"I will not. You shall return to your father's house or I shall leave my dead body here. You scoundrel, release that lady!"

Carl was following out the line of action laid down for Prentice, as well as he was able.

That he was fairly successful was evident from the fact that Jesse James actually grinned, being unable to control his features.

"Look here, you fool, if you know what's good for a man about your size, you'll get away from this section in a hurry. No man ever yet tackled Rube Burrows—that's me—or my pard, yonder—that's Jesse James—without having his eyeteeth drawn. Scamper now, before we make crow's meat of ye."

This was accompanied by a fearful scowl and an ominous movement of the revolver.

The would-be rescuer of the maiden in distress seemed startled.

"What! Rube Burrows here?"

"On deck."

"And Jesse James, too?"

"Correct."

"I wouldn't have believed it possible—such men I thought above a thing like this. But it makes no difference—you shall allow this young lady to go with me or pay the penalty with your lives."

"Ha! ha! hear the terrier bark!"

"Come, now; move on!"

"Let's pulverize him!" growled the dwarf, as he squatted like a great toad, apparently ready to make a leap upon his prey.

"For the last time, I ask you to release that lady."

"We refuse. How does that strike you, Mr. Impudence?" answered Burrows.

"Then take the consequences."

What followed was a scene that only a master hand could describe with justice.

Confusion reigned.

Shots rang out.

The three desperadoes had been in many a bloody encounter and received wounds, so that they would know how to act in pretending to be shot down.

As the supposed major fired his first shot, Jesse James

reeled backward, clasping his hand over his heart, and sang out:

"He's done it—I'm killed, boys. Avenge me." With which remark he sank in a heap.

Carl had aimed directly at his body, instead of over his head.

Meanwhile the others were banging away at a tremendous rate, shouting at the same time.

Susie clapped her hands over her ears and sank nerveless at the foot of the cottonwood, but something caused her to keep her startled gaze upon her bold champion.

She knew one of the desperadoes was down, but still the odds were two to one.

Carl dodged this way and that, as if to avoid the bullets that went singing over his head.

He was watching for another chance to get in his work on the enemy.

It came.

He fired point-blank at the tall Alabama outlaw, and felt a thrill of exultation when he saw Rube Burrows fall upon one knee.

The other tried to aim at him, but his aim was very unsteady.

As the revolver was discharged, Carl again fired, and the terror of Alabama rolled over like a log.

Not dreaming but what he had actually slain both of these desperadoes, for whom such a great reward was offered, Carl next turned his attention to the ugly dwarf.

Marden skipped out, as though deeming discretion the better part of valor, so the detective had to be content with sending a couple of haphazard shots after him in the darkness, the second of which seemed to have struck home, judging from the shriek that rang through the woods, sounding like the cry of a lost spirit dragged down to the eternal fires.

CHAPTER VII.

THE WRONG MAN.

Carl had not followed the dwarf more than a dozen paces.

He believed a bullet must have struck the flying man, if that terrible shriek was any criterion by which to judge.

Satisfied with the result thus far, he turned again into the glade.

In his hand he held the revolver containing one load, and it was his intention, if either of the two outlaws showed a disposition to keep up the affair, to use this load in disposing of the man.

So he glanced sharply toward them.

They lay just where they had fallen.

The fire blazed away merrily, and revealed the fact that both had fallen in very dramatic attitudes, Jesse James clutching his coat, as though the bullet had passed

in there, while Burrows clasped his pistol and lay upon his face, his knees being under him.

One of the men groaned dismally, but no attempt was made to interfere with the gallant rescuer of innocence in distress.

Carl approached the girl.

She sprang up to meet him.

Her face was scarlet with the feelings that influenced her.

"Oh! Major Prentice, can you ever forgive me for treating you so harshly? I did not know—I made a terrible mistake in acting as I did."

Her hands were clasped.

Carl felt uneasy under it all, knowing that she believed him another.

"It is nothing, Miss Susie. I am only too glad that fate sent me here," he muttered.

"Are they dead?" she asked, in a low, frightened tone, glancing at the two motionless forms, and shivering with terror.

"It looks like it; but come, this is no place for you, miss. Let us make all haste to reach your home again."

She was only too willing.

They did not look again in the direction of the recumbent forms.

Had they done so, just before passing in among the trees, they might have seen the man on his knees raise his head, and, placing his thumb on his nose, make a gesture of derision.

Possibly this would have surprised Carl.

It was a case of deception all around, though Carl seemed to have the best of it so far.

Carl had no desire to remain at the scene of action longer.

His wish was to see Susie safe under her father's roof, and then it would be easy for him to shape his own plans after that to suit the circumstances.

Of course, they took the bridle path—Carl wished that was spelled "bridal," for his heart was strangely drawn to the little woman who clung so closely to his arm.

He pushed himself a little ahead, so as to keep the undergrowth from striking her.

Before they had gone more than forty yards he felt her start.

"What is that sound?" she asked, puzzled.

Indeed, it was a strange noise—Carl had heard it before, and was not deceived.

Yes, it was the dwarf laughing—he did not express merriment like other men, but seemed to shake all over, while guttural sounds burst from his lips like small explosions.

This was the first suspicion Carl had that something was wrong.

Had they all been playing a part?

Somehow he fancied the death of the two desperadoes was too strikingly dramatic to be natural.

Then he remembered that he had been holding the revolver taken from Prentice.

For the first time it occurred to him that the weapon might have been doctored for the occasion, blank cartridges being substituted for the loaded ones.

He felt chagrined.

If this should really prove to be the case, he had lost a grand opportunity to wind up the career of those noted desperadoes.

When he aimed so carefully, and fired at the hearts of his foes, he was only shooting blanks.

Their actions had been assumed.

Well, it was too late now to remedy the evil, unless he deserted Susie and went back to use his own reliable gun.

That he would not do, so the outlaws got off without damage.

At any rate, he had saved Susie, though the anger of the conspirators would be great when they learned the truth.

For that he cared little.

They pushed along the narrow path.

Neither spoke, save when Carl warned his fair companion to look out for low-hanging limbs that stretched their arms out menacingly.

At length the road was reached.

Here they could walk side by side.

Carl objected to sailing under false colors, especially when the girl was thus mentally showering blessings on the head of his rival.

He must enlighten her.

The truth was bound soon to appear, at any rate, and no better opportunity could be found for having a confidential talk than while they were on the way home.

His chance soon came.

"Major Prentice, you have not told——"

"Miss Allen, you make a mistake—I am not Major Prentice," he said, grimly.

She tried to get her arm away from his, but Carl objected and held it tight.

"Not Major Prentice?"

"I am happy to say that the person you refer to, after having a social glass with your father, lies in the woods yonder so sound asleep that Gabriel's trumpet would hardly rouse him from his state of somnolence."

She could not see his face, of course; it was too dark for that; but as she stood there she stared hard at him.

"Who are you?" she asked, in trembling tones.

"One whom you met only a few hours ago for the first time, Miss Susie—Carl Whicher."

"This is strange. I saw you in the firelight when you fought with those men, and believed my rescuer to be Major Prentice."

"Exactly, and it was my intention that any one seeing me should believe that."

"Strange! Were you ashamed to perform such a noble deed under your colors, sir?"

He laughed lightly.

"Never, Miss Susie, but the circumstances connected with this case made it advisable for me to do this thing. You shall hear for yourself as we journey toward home, and your father will be the judge between us."

This was agreeable.

She felt decidedly anxious to hear all there was to the story.

This young man had made an impression on her heart, even in the short time she had known him, and the thought that he had been the means of saving her from such a dreadful fate was extremely pleasant.

Carl was a good talker.

He knew how to condense a story and give the salient points.

At the same time, he made as light of his own adventures as possible, and yet she understood what he had passed through, without any elaboration on his part.

Thus their walk in the direction of the squire's house was enlivened by a description of the ingenious plot entered into by the artful major to carry her heart by storm while posing as a hero.

Thanks to the intervention of Carl, this brilliant idea was destined to act as might a boomerang, and inflict damage upon the man from whom it proceeded.

The girl experienced a complete revulsion of feeling; she had begun to be sorry for her former treatment of the major, when under the belief that it was that individual who had rescued her so bravely.

Now she learned the truth.

She detested a man who would stoop so low in order to win her by deceit.

At the same time Carl was naturally advanced in her estimation.

He builded upon the fabric designed by his rival; not that this was his usual way of doing things, but the circumstances of the case seemed to favor him.

After that nothing could displace him in her estimation.

Leaving them to reach the squire's house, where they would find that worthy up and anxiously awaiting their coming, we will look in upon a scene that occurred about this time in the same glade where Carl had just encountered the trio of desperadoes.

About half an hour after the desperate scene, a man cautiously approached this place.

A fire still burned there.

At times the laughter of men could be heard echoing through the woods.

The party approaching caught this sound, and chuckled to himself.

"They're on hand. That's good. I began to be afraid that strange sleep of mine had ruined the whole business. But my lucky star is in the ascendant."

Thus muttering, the major crept along, drawing closer to the fire.

The voices of the men sitting there came to his ears distinctly, and he could even make out what they said.

It seemed as though the two outlaws were joking the dwarf about something, for they spoke of his running qualities and the tone of his voice when raised to a death screech, while Marden, on his part, retaliated in kind.

The major paid little attention to this.

He could now see part of the camp, and his eager eyes were roving about searching for the object he most desired to see.

Somehow, a feeling like lead came upon his spirits as he failed to catch sight of Susie.

It was like snuffing out a candle.

The major no longer chuckled.

Instead he muttered a savage oath under his breath. What could this mean? Did they have the girl concealed somewhere?

In vain he peered about.

Success failed to greet him, and his brow grew darker than ever with anger.

At the same time, he was no fool.

No matter what had happened to ruin his plans, he dared not go too far with the kind of men with whom he dealt.

They would not stand it.

A hasty word might cause a revolver to flash on a level with his head, and a bullet start on an investigating tour of his brain.

At the same time, they respected a man who dared face them and tell what he thought.

Major Prentice stalked into camp.

Jesse James caught sight of him first.

"Hallo, here! What's this mean?"

The others jumped to their feet and stared at the intruder in a puzzled way.

"Did she get away?" demanded Rube Burrows.

"She! Who the devil do you mean?"

"The girl, of course."

"How should I know? That's what I was just about to ask you. Where is she?"

The three desperadoes looked blank.

Was the man out of his mind.

Their late exultation vanished.

"You took her away about half an hour ago, after killing us all in fine style."

"Confusion! It is all a terrible mistake! Boys, I swear to you I have not seen the girl to-night," declared the amazed major.

CHAPTER VIII.

A CHANGE OF BASE.

Naturally, the three men whom the major addressed were taken aback at his declaration. They looked at each other without saying a word, but Jesse James, catching the eye of Burrows, tapped his forehead with his hand, as though to signify that, in his opinion, the other was deranged.

This would account for the strange fact of his denial concerning his presence, when they knew that he had been there.

The major saw the movement.

He was already in a towering passion. Had these men been other than they were, he would have allowed the storm to burst; but he had too healthy a regard for his own personal safety to attempt such a thing here.

It would simply be a way of committing *hari kari*, for these men would soon dispose of a man who braved them.

"Explain to me, Jesse James; it is all a mystery to me. I don't understand your strange actions and words. Speak, man!"

He meant business, at any rate.

Jesse James had a certain amount of respect for a man of this character.

"See here, major, you seem to be in earnest. It was no dream to us that you were here half an hour ago, shot us all down in fine style, chased Marden into the woods, and knocked him over on the jump, and went away with the girl."

"The girl?" gasped Prentice.

"Certainly."

"Susie Allen?"

"The same."

"She was here?"

"Well, I reckon."

"You carried her away from home?"

"Those were the orders you gave."

"Yes, but, hang it, man, there has been some terrible mistake here."

"Not on our part, major."

"Listen to me, Jesse James. I left the squire's, and rode slowly along, meaning to reach this place and wait.

"On the road I became frightfully drowsy—never knew wine to affect me so before.

"Unable to keep my seat, I fastened the horse to a tree,

tumbled over, and knew nothing until I came to, about a quarter of an hour ago.

"Striking a match, I saw that I was late, and made all possible haste to reach the rendezvous to carry out my part of the programme.

"I arrive here, only to be told that the girl has been rescued by some one you swear must have been me. Now, what in the wide world am I to think of this?"

The quick mind of Jesse James wrestled with the problem at once.

"I begin to see light," he said, and at the same time frowned heavily.

"Go on!" cried the major, grasping his arm.

"The wine you drank with the squire must have been drugged."

"I have already suspected it."

"There is a plot that beats our own."

Suspicion at once pointed to the detective, Carl Whicher, who was known to be on their track.

"How could he know about this unless some one has turned traitor?"

The outlaw paid no attention to the covert insinuation back of this remark.

"Fiends take him! He stole my revolver while I slept!" growled the major.

"That explains another thing."

"What?"

"He aimed dead at us when he fired, and with any revolver than one prepared for the occasion, we would have been slaughtered in a way we didn't calculate on. It must have been your gun he used."

"I had blanks in it."

"That settles it, major. The man has managed to steal your thunder."

Prentice gnashed his teeth.

He was in a humor to do something desperate—murder, even, would not cause him to hesitate.

"The man who crosses my path dies. I am ready to swear to that," he growled.

None of the others were in the best of humor, for they felt they had been hoodwinked.

If, therefore, the major proposed any bold scheme for revenging himself, they would, in all probability, join with him.

General conversation ensued.

During the continuance of this, all minor details were discussed, and presently they understood everything.

It was taken for granted that, after rescuing the maiden, the detective would at once head straight for her father's house.

By this time they had probably arrived under the roof of her home, and believed themselves safe from all danger.

Ordinary rascals would have given up the case and fled from the country, upon having their plans thus undermined and defeat staring them in the face.

These men were not built that way.

Some people never know when they are beaten, but keep up what seems to be a hopeless struggle, until some sudden freak of fortune throws success into their lap.

If they do succeed, we call them prodigies, but failure gives them the name of fools.

Although defeated in the first round, the quartet of plotters still had hope.

There was a fighting chance yet.

They put their heads together.

It was quickly determined to follow the man whose stratagem had worsted them.

Hence they made preparations for leaving the camp in the glade.

The major had become somewhat cool again since he saw that all hope had not yet been lost.

He had a chance still.

He brought up his horse.

One of the others loaned him a revolver.

"There ain't any blank cartridges in it, either," said Rube Burrows; "so be careful how you look along it, major."

"I'll be careful, if I can only see that man at the other end," quoth Prentice.

He was a little curious to know what this rival, this new Richmond in the field, was like, and whether he had ever met him.

Then, again, he remembered about hearing a horse neigh among the trees while on his way to the squire's.

When he related this to his comrades, they at once declared there could be no doubt but that his enemy was watching from that point.

No doubt he had arranged it all with the old squire beforehand, and when Prentice had walked into the house he was entering a trap.

"Come, let us be off."

"Yes, we might as well be moving. We can talk it all over on the road, boys."

Jesse James assumed the leadership.

He never served under another. Whenever engaged in some bold foray upon bank or express car, the others looked up to him as the one best fitted to give orders.

So they made along the bridle path.

Ere they had gone twenty yards, Jesse James called a halt.

"The ground is soft here, and footprints can be easily seen. Bend over, major, while I strike a match, and satisfy yourself that we are not on any wildgoose chase."

Prentice craned his neck.

The match flared up, and was moved along close to the surface of the soft ground.

Numerous marks were seen, including the trail of the horse, but it did not take half a minute to discover a small footprint, undoubtedly made by a girl.

"There it is!" cried Rube.

The major admitted the corn.

He did not doubt his companions, though rather angry at the idea of having been so neatly outwitted.

Again they proceeded.

The road was reached, and once more Jesse James made use of his matches.

Thus he was enabled to discover that Whicher and the girl had turned in the direction that would take them to the squire's.

All reason for doubt was now removed, and they had a certainty to deal with.

Talking in low tones, they advanced along the road, and the squire's place was finally reached.

Four desperate men clambered over the fence, and approached the house.

The major was ready to try the roughest means known for winning his bride—abduction by force—since his pretty scheme had proved a dead failure.

"Any dogs?" asked Jesse James.

"Yes, one; always kept chained."

"I thought I heard him when we were here before. Perhaps they've let him loose on the grounds. If that is so, we'll hear from him mighty soon."

Hardly were the words out of his lips when there was a terrible growl on the left, and a rushing sound could be heard, indicating the swift passage of an advancing body.

"Look out, Rube!" sang the Missouri outlaw.

Burrows was on his guard.

Only the faint light from the stars came to show him his onrushing enemy, but the Alabama desperado leveled his Winchester and covered the brute.

Then came a stream of fire, accompanied by the boom of the gun.

Struck by the leaden missile, but not mortally hurt, the enraged animal continued his forward movement.

Again the repeating rifle sounded.

This time no yelp followed the shot, for Rube's canine adversary was so close that the whole top of the dog's skull was carried away.

It settled him.

At the same time the alarm had been given—there was no longer a chance for secrecy.

The house would have to be carried by storm.

It had been their intention to steal a march upon those under the squire's roof, and by the use of some diplomacy gain the lost ground.

That was now useless.

Changing their tactics, they hurriedly advanced upon the house.

It loomed up before them, dark and gloomy.

This was a new business for Jesse James—he had forced banks ere now, and stopped railway trains, making the passengers hold up their hands and deliver their valuables, like a highwayman of old, but never before had he attacked a dwelling—at least since the war, when a guerrilla.

There was something novel about it, however, that gave promise of fun—these men had a queer idea of what fun might mean.

CHAPTER IX.

BETRAYED.

It may be safely assumed that those within the squire's house were not asleep at this time.

When Carl and Susie had told their stories, it was agreed that the enemy, after such a repulse, would prove more formidable than ever, and that eternal vigilance was the price they must pay for safety.

Hence, it was quickly decided that such a thing as sleep should be unknown under that roof until dawn.

The squire proved to be a good captain, under the circumstances; he bustled around, armed to the teeth himself, and aroused the three men who worked upon the place.

These parties were given guns.

The dog was unchained, and each door and window was barricaded.

As the squire's house had been built during troublous times, arrangements had been made for just such an emergency.

Consequently, when they had gone the complete rounds and all had been made secure, it would require a battering ram to effect an entrance, unless treachery opened a way.

Time passed on.

Carl struck a match and consulted his watch, finding it was nearly three A. M.

A few more hours and daylight was due.

What would the rising sun look upon?

Would the house be smoldering in ruins or stand there intact?

No one could tell.

The men whose arrival was momentarily expected were capable of anything, once their savage passions were aroused.

Carl's meditations were not of the most pleasant character imaginable, and it was with almost positive results that he found them interrupted.

The large and fierce dog rushed past the house, growling.

His sense of smell had warned him that the enemy had come.

Carl nudged his companion, for the squire had already gone asleep in his chair.

He now sprang up.

"Gad! I was nearly off. What's the row, Carl?" he exclaimed, rubbing his eyes.

"Listen! The dog rushed by. I think——"

He did not finish the sentence.

There came a heavy report of a gun, a yelp from the dog, then almost immediately after a second shot, muffled.

"Yes, they are here!" ejaculated the squire, poking his gun through a small opening made for this purpose.

"Hold your fire—wait until we hear them at the door," cautioned Carl.

"Right you are. We will wait."

They would not have long.

Plainly could they hear the swift rush of the determined men as they advanced.

They sprang upon the porch.

Some one seized the handle of the door and shook the whole structure, savagely.

"I warn you to leave us in peace. We are all well armed, and will fight desperately. Go while you have the opportunity," called out the squire from the other side of the door.

A harsh laugh greeted his words.

"You old fool, do you know who you have to deal with. Jesse James is here—open the door, or we will break it in," came a voice.

The old squire was undaunted.

"Never, you wretch!"

"Then you must take the consequences."

"Remember, I have warned you. If you are all blown into eternity the next minute, it will be your own fault."

Some one outside uttered an exclamation of alarm, and a shuffling sound could be heard, as though the man endeavored to get away from the dangerous quarter.

The squire's words caused no alarm in any other breast than that of the major.

Something struck the door a terrific blow.

It was an ax.

Rube Burrows had stumbled over it while advancing on the house, and, believing he could make good use of such a weapon, took it along with him.

This was the last straw on the camel's back.

The squire had bottled up his wrath up to this moment, but when the house echoed with the blow given by the ax, the bottle burst.

"Take it, then, you rascals!"

With that he let fly.

The gun sounded like a small cannon, and, no doubt, the major believed for the moment a bomb had exploded near by.

Fortunately for him, he was out of range.

Not so another of the party.

Rube Burrows was swinging the ax round sideways or another tremendous blow, and, as luck would have it, some of the contents of the squire's gun struck the steel.

Glancing off, one piece of lead cut a gash in the cheek of the dwarf, while others peppered him in other portions of his anatomy.

He was painfully, but not seriously, wounded, and the blows he gave vent to as his hands wandered from one spot to another as he sought to discover whether he had covered them all were simply astounding.

Meanwhile Burrows wielded the ax.

Suddenly the hammering ceased.

What did this mean?

Those within were on the *qui vive*.

They expected a trick.

They could hear their foes outside conversing in low tones, and this warned them that the enemy had not abandoned the case.

What were they up to?

Surely something was in the wind.

Suddenly their ears were assailed by a shriek.

It was a feminine cry, and came from the upper region of the house.

Carl started back, appalled.

At the same time he heard the squire cry out:

"That is Susie's voice. Great Heaven! I forgot that girl Dorothy is in league with these villains. She has betrayed us."

CHAPTER X.

STIRRING SCENES.

The words of the squire covered the situation entirely.

It flashed through Carl's mind at the same time that the woman Dorothy must be at the bottom of it all.

He, too, had forgotten her.

Now he remembered the name as belonging to the girl who had sold herself to Prentice; it was she who put the sleeping potion in Susie's possession earlier in the same night.

In what way could she betray her young mistress to the enemy?

Carl was unable to say.

He had no time to spend in surmising, for an emergency of this order has to be met in the same spirit that characterized its coming.

Already the squire was striking a light, unmindful of the danger that might come to them from such action.

He applied the match to a lantern.

Carl meant to accompany him, and gave hurried orders to the three men to move up to the hole in the door and guard it closely.

Then he sprang after the old man.

The latter was already mounting the stairs with impetuous haste.

His paternal affection may not have been so great as that of some men, but the cry that had reached his ears brought a pang of agony to his heart.

It was his child who called out.

As for Carl, he was already so deeply interested in the young girl, that he would have suffered keenly had any ill befallen her.

After what had already happened on this night, he knew his fate was bound up in hers.

Hence, his nerves were strung to extreme point of tension as he followed the old man.

The women folks had been placed in a room where it was believed they would be secure, unless the house might be captured.

Straight to the door the squire rushed.

He seized hold of the knob.

The door was secured.

Forgetting that he had himself given orders that this should be done by the women, the squire seemed to see the very worst in this fact.

He shook the door furiously.

"Open, here! open, I say!" he shouted.

There were signs of excitement within.

No one opened the door.

Carl, although not a large man, had more than the ordinary amount of strength.

Under the excitement of the moment, he put his shoulder against the door, and actually pushed the latter in.

Even he himself could not tell later on how the thing was done, but the fact remained.

They rushed in.

A light was found within the room.

Thus Carl, glancing around, was able to see whom he confronted.

Two women were there.

Upon leaving them, some time previous, there had been four.

Who were the missing ones?

Carl's heart seemed frozen with fear as he glanced sharply at those cowering near.

The squire had already sprung over to where they crouched, half hiding their eyes, as if afraid to look upon the new intruders.

"Where is my child?" he cried.

They did not answer.

Instead they stared stupidly at him, as though unable to comprehend the why and wherefore of his presence.

"Speak, woman! where is Susie?"

He shook her shoulder.

This seemed to arouse her.

She found her tongue.

"Gone!" she gasped.

"Gone! Where—with whom?"

"Two men were here."

"And they carried her off?"

"Yes."

"Where did they come from?"

"They followed Dorothy up the back stairs."

"The traitress! Where is she?"

"Gone with Susie."

"Did they carry her off, too?"

"Yes, sir."

Carl heard no more.

He saw an open door at the other end of the room, and made for it.

It was his belief that this would lead him to the rear stairs mentioned by the girl in her excited recital of the facts.

This proved to be the truth.

It was so extremely dark, however—for he had neglected to snatch up the lantern held by the squire—that he came near pitching headlong down the flight, saving himself from such an ugly tumble only by clutching hold of a hand rail accidentally.

Rapidly he flew down.

Reaching the bottom, of course, he did not know in which direction to turn.

Here instinct came into play.

He felt a draft of cool air strike him on the cheek, and realized that the current must proceed from an open door.

So he groped his way in that direction, and, to his satisfaction, found his surmise to be a correct one.

The back door stood open.

He passed through.

Once more he stood under the stars, and listened to get some clew.

Various sounds came to his ears.

In the first place, he could hear the squire still questioning the domestic, seeking to learn all she knew about the matter.

Then the voices of the men near the front of the house could be heard, and speedily came the crash of firearms, as though they were making an attack upon the defenders—perhaps a mock assault to cover their retreat.

Carl had caught more.

He was not listening for any of these sounds, his attention being riveted to another quarter.

It seemed to him that he saw moving figures near and, just before the crash of firearms drowned all else, caught a low, half-choked cry for help.

Whether this latter was really the truth, or the effort of imagination, he did not stop to analyze, but immediately darted after.

In his hand he held a revolver.

This one he knew to contain four bullets, and if he found a chance to use it, he would give the rascally knappers cause to regret their work.

The darkness was intense.

Carl strained his eyes.

He seemed to be gifted with the power of a cat, he could actually see even in that gloom.

There was no mistake about the moving figures—they were a reality.

He followed swiftly.

Meantime, there was quite a little battle going on front of the house, perhaps a bloodless one, as both parties to it kept well out of range.

The assailants were merely making a racket to draw full attention to the front, while their comrades carried on their work in the rear.

Carl knew one thing.

There were in all probability but four in the whole party.

As two seemed to be engaged in the uproar in front of the house, this left a couple to carry on the other work.

Besides, the domestic had declared but two men had followed Dorothy into the room, one of whom had seized Susie, while the other forced Dorothy to accompany him.

He had not waited long enough to hear these men described, but could lay a pretty shrewd guess as to who they were.

One must be the doughty major himself, while the companion might have been any member of the trio of rascals banded with him.

It mattered little.

Carl meant business, and was not to be discouraged by the fact that he might find himself opposed by even such a terror as Jesse James, or Red Rube, the Alabama train robber.

His progress was rapid.

At the same time the detective did not blunder along stumbling over obstacles, and warning every one in several counties of his approach.

He moved as quietly as the nature of the ground and his own rapidity would allow.

The racket kept up in front of the house served in no manner to deaden any noise he made.

Thus he rapidly overtook those he pursued.

They had already reached the trees growing near the country house.

Once under these, the shadow served to conceal them even more.

If the men noticed his coming at all, they no doubt thought it was one of their friends.

Favored by fortune, Carl advanced.

Now the trees shaded him also.

Where were those he sought?

He glanced eagerly around, but it was his hearing that gave him the clew.

The party had come to a halt, and seemed to be waiting; perhaps this was the rendezvous where they were to meet after the affair was over, and success or failure had crowned their efforts.

He approached them.

Each of the two men seemed to be holding a female figure, and Carl, in the darkness, had to make a haphazard guess.

Major Prentice (for he was of the party) was the first to discover the detective.

He had his revolver out.

The darkness was not so intense but what he could aim point-blank at a human figure at that short distance.

Carl was already rushing upon him.

Prentice felt a thrill.

He believed he had the game in his hand.

All he had to do was to pull the trigger, and the headed rival would be no more.

Who can tell what thoughts flashed through his brain with the rapidity of lightning during that exceedingly brief space of time.

The major's finger pressed the trigger.

There was a bright flash.

Then came a heavy report.

Carl had not seen fit to dodge, and yet the leaden missile failed to scatter his brains upon the sward, as the other intended.

Why?

It was very simple.

Just as Prentice was in the act of pulling the fatal trigger, Susie Allen realized what an awful deed he was about to commit, and, with a sudden cry, she struck his

his was enough.

The weapon went off, it is true, but not in a line with his head.

Susie had saved her lover's life, making him more dear to her than ever.

CHAPTER XI.

BAFFLED.

Carl himself realized what a narrow escape he had had, and so the fact that he owed it to the girl.

He must cement the bonds that fate seemed to take such pains in forming between these young people, neither of whom knew of the other's existence forty-eight hours before, but who had been brought together in such a peculiar way.

There was no time to think of such things, but Carl found an opportunity later.

He was making for the major like the rush of a whirlwind when the latter let fly at him, and even this circumstance did not tend to bring him to a halt.

Prentice knew he was lost.

His coward soul recognized the fact, and he endeavored to grasp Susie again, in order to hold her up before a shield.

The girl was shrewd enough to guess his intentions, and rebuffed him.

He was left face to face with the human avalanche rushing upon him.

He made one more effort, but the half-raised revolver was knocked from his hand.

The Alpine climbers caught in the path of the avalanche go down like sticks.

So Major Prentice found himself utterly unable to stem the fierce tide that struck him so suddenly and irresistibly.

He might have given Carl a hard battle under ordinary circumstances, being a man of good physique; but the impetus of the assailant carried power with it.

Susie, turning to see what took place, heard the quick, throbbing percussion of fierce blows, a human groan, and then one of the two struggling forms hurled the other away as a farmer might toss aside a bag of oats.

The little affair, so far as it related to these men, seemed to be over.

Carl had won.

Again he was a hero—how her maiden heart went out to him then.

This might not be the end.

Two human devils were near at hand, doubtless bounding toward the rendezvous, after being warned by the shot that all was not well in that quarter.

Should they reach the scene of action now, Carl's triumph might be turned into defeat.

No one knew the need of haste better than Carl, and as soon as he had seen his mortal foe sent to grass, his first thought was of flight.

With this in his mind, he sprang to where the young girl stood.

"Susie!" he cried, not wishing to make a blunder.

"It is I," she answered.

"We must go before the others come," he said, breathing hard from his exertions.

"Yes, yes. Let us fly."

He took her hand in one of his—the other clutched his revolver.

Thus they started to hurry away.

Fate still pursued them.

Although Marden, the dwarf, was wounded in half-a-dozen places, and had been unmercifully pounded by Carl's revolver, so that he had a mouth minus several yellow fangs, he was just chock as full of the devilish spirit that generally influenced his actions as ever.

It happened that in leaving the place Carl and Susie passed close by where he lay.

The long arms of the dwarf were suddenly locked about Carl's legs.

At the same time he bellowed:

"Here he is! I've got him safe! This way, Jesse James! Quick, Rube Burrows, and rid the world of this carrion. Ho! there, come on!"

Carl was swung about by that immense power possessed by the dwarf, but he did not lose his wonderful presence of mind.

The revolver was raised.

Again it descended.

An awful dull sound ensued as it crashed upon the shock of hair which acted as a sort of pad, saving the dwarf's skull from being crushed in like an eggshell.

Again and again he beat a tattoo upon the cranium of his foe, adding still more force to his blows.

Human nature, even of the hardened type represented by this ruffian, could not stand such terrific punishment.

Marden groaned.

Carl could feel a shudder pass through the frame of the other, and at the same time his arms relaxed their hold.

He was done for.

Still, even in his apparent defeat, he may have won a victory, if he had detained Carl long enough for the two desperadoes to arrive upon the scene and get their work in.

Was this so?

The detective had done remarkably well thus far, and did not mean to be balked by fate if bravery could prevent it.

He turned like a tiger at bay.

The rush of the oncoming outlaws could be plainly heard near by, but they had not yet reached the scene of action.

This lucky circumstance gave Carl another chance.

He improved it.

Again seizing Susie's dear hand, he drew her away from the scene of violence, nor was she unwilling to go.

They passed among the trees.

Hardly had they gone, when two men came upon the scene.

"Marden! hello! where are you?" called Burrows, thinking it very significant that such silence had fallen.

A groan answered him.

"Strike a light!" called the Alabama man, and his confederate flashed a lantern on the scene.

What they saw astonished them.

Both men lay there in their blood, apparently slain.

The two outlaws ran on.

Before them loomed up the house, and yet they had not sighted their intended prey.

What could it mean?

Suddenly the space in front of the house was lighted up, as the gray eye of a reflecting lantern was turned on them.

Burrows, finding himself thus betrayed, and expecting a shot, wheeled, with an oath, threw his rifle to his shoulder and fired.

The shot was succeeded by a crash of glass, a howl of pain from a man, and darkness shut down upon the scene in a manner that was little short of marvelous.

While this lasted the two discomfited outlaws crawled away, carrying the senseless dwarf along with them.

CHAPTER XII.

COALS OF FIRE.

Carl had reached the house with his precious charge, and was, it may be set down for certain, warmly welcomed by Susie's father, who had been almost distracted during the brief interval that had elapsed.

There was no time for explanations now.

The detective was certain that he had used up the dwarf and Major Prentice, so that no further trouble need be apprehended from them.

This did not close the case.

Far from it.

There were still two men at liberty who were to be feared more than a dozen dwarfs.

While Jesse James and Rube Burrows remained in the neighborhood no one could feel as though safety was assured.

"How about that back door?"

"Jove! it's open yet."

"Then run and close it. Unless we unearth another traitor in our fort, those rascals will not gain entrance again."

The squire bustled away.

Carl, being left with the men, put them on their guard. His suspicions were confirmed, as has already been seen.

One of the men manipulated the reflector, and with Rube Burrows fired at the lantern his bullet, best smashing the whole business, clipped a piece out of Marden's leg, and caused him to dance around with such wild howls of pain.

Had the two train robbers thought best to continue the fight, there would in all probability have been a long engagement, and more than one must have gone down.

Luckily, they had already decided to draw off, as there was no longer profit in the game.

Carl waited.

He did not trust appearances, having found them deceptive in the past.

Who could tell what these men were up to?

They were full of cunning and trickery.

So he kept his force on guard, constantly watching the enemy that did not come.

Slowly the hours passed by.

Dawn came.

The defenders of the squire's home breathed easier for they had reason to believe that the attack had given up.

No signs of the enemy could be seen.

The wounded man was looked after, and all partook of a hearty breakfast.

Then Carl slipped out to reconnoiter.

He knew there was still a certain amount of darkness that he would run across an enemy, for the outlaws might be lurking in the near vicinity of the house.

Under these circumstances he walked about in a cautious manner, keeping a weapon ready in his hand all the while.

Not a sign of the outlaws did he see.

They had certainly gone.

Carl was satisfied.

Things had turned out remarkably well in this case.

It was a glorious victory.

Carl did not feel satisfied to remain idle, for he had more business on hand.

He remembered all he had heard between the parties in the mountain cabin concerning other matters.

The bank in the town of Strattan was in danger of being robbed.

These men knew that an unusual amount of money would be in the hands of the tellers at a certain hour this day, and they had laid their plans to make good with it.

Carl meant to defeat them.

He would also have a chance at Jesse James, and perhaps his vow could be kept, unless that individual

shirt of mail, or was protected by the satanic master he served.

Carl did not disclose his mission to either the squire or his daughter.

He feared lest they should try to dissuade him from attempting it, and knew how weak his resolutions would be when Susie pleaded.

Business and love often conflict.

Having recovered his horse, Carl disguised himself as a rough-looking mountaineer, perhaps a cattle buyer, and was off.

He believed there was a chance for hot work ahead, and had seen that his firearms were in prime condition for business.

Thus he left behind him the scene of his recent engagement, and went forward to new endeavors, believing that he must win in the end, even against such desperate odds.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE STRATTAN BANK.

The little town of Strattan was not a bustling business center, pulsating with life and throbbing with industry. Still, it was a center for quite a section of country, and had considerable trade.

Several trains a day came in over the Iron Mountain, and the business of the place was such that a bank had been established.

Ordinarily there was not a great exchange at this institution, for the merchants did a small business, and their accounts did not swell the volume of the bank's business to any remarkable figure.

Once a month, however, a strong box came to the bank by express, carefully guarded.

It contained a large amount of money, to be paid out the first of the month to several concerns employing many men.

After such a visitation, Strattan was always a lively place, money being plenty.

It seems that in some way Jesse James had gotten wind of this matter.

He coveted the contents of that strong box.

He kept posted on all the particulars of the transaction and could tell just the hour the box was placed in the keeping of the cashier and teller of the bank, by the men who brought it from the station.

Looking around for a companion upon whom he could depend, he ran across the Alabama outlaw.

Joe Burrows had already gained quite a name in his State as a train robber and desperado.

The notion had struck him to run up into old Missouri to seek to meet the man whose example he sought to follow.

These two notorious scourges of the express company had come together and formed an alliance offensive and defensive.

It was a poor lookout for the shippers of valuable goods in Missouri when these men came together, unless something occurred to cause a rupture between them, the world would soon hear of daring and reckless deeds before which all previous efforts of train robbers would pale into insignificance.

Now Jesse James set to work planning in the matter,

that box of greenbacks and silver was in great danger of an elopement.

Such a man seldom failed.

There were numerous reasons for this.

In the first place, his plans were carefully drawn, and allowances made for various possibilities.

They worked with clocklike precision.

Again, his blows fell unexpectedly.

When he was believed to be hundreds of miles away, he suddenly descended upon his prey and made a ten-strike.

Those are the tactics that made men like Napoleon and Sheridan famous.

Last of all, his very name and presence carried such terror with them that few men proved bold enough to offer resistance when they learned that it was Jesse James who demanded that they hand over the cash.

This man carried many of the dashing ways of the guerilla warfare, learned during the Civil War, into his business.

He found it paid.

Even those who detested his life could not but admire his dashing forays, and the reckless manner in which he defied the officers sent from time to time to apprehend him.

Carl knew all about him.

He had made the man a study, for he meant to have much to do with him.

When Carl advanced upon the town it was between nine and ten o'clock in the morning.

He, too, knew something of the trains arriving and departing at Strattan.

The one due at eleven would probably carry the strong box to the bank.

There was plenty of time, and he did not hurry.

Squire Allen lived a couple of miles out, and the road was in fair condition, so that the detective found nothing to complain of on the way.

He attracted little attention on the streets of Strattan, for strangers came to town every day.

The sun was shining, and quite a number of town folks were on the street, the men gathered in knots discussing politics and, perhaps, the last daring train robbery effected by the James boys in another part of the State.

A thunderbolt falling from the clear heavens above could not have been more of a surprise than Carl's news would have been to these men had they heard it.

He did not mean to tell them.

No doubt the James boys had sympathizers among the people of Strattan, as in every other Missouri town, which fact made it impossible to organize any secret expedition against them, as the news traveled faster than the officers.

He would go straight to headquarters with his news, and deliver it to the parties most interested in the situation.

Of course, this meant the bank officers.

Riding up, he tied his horse in front of a hardware store next the bank.

To disarm suspicion, he went into this business house.

Here he made a purchase of a penknife and dallied over the cases in making his selection so that it was ten o'clock when he finally reached the street again.

Banking hours had come.

There was little to be done in the local institution, however, at this time.

Now and then some tradesman would come in and get a bill changed, or, perhaps, draw money on a small check.

After eleven, however, they would have their hands full for the remainder of the day, for at about that hour the strong box arrived.

When Carl sauntered into the bank he saw at a glance what a soft snap Jesse James and his comrade would have if the affair was allowed to go on in its own way.

The railing was a flimsy affair, and the cashier and teller could not expect any sort of protection from this source.

One man, with determination and a revolver to back him, could easily command the whole situation.

It would prove an exceedingly fortunate thing for them if the detective succeeded in baffling the designs of the men who had planned to rifle the bank an hour hence.

Carl walked over to the door of the rear room, where the president had his desk.

He knocked.

This had to be repeated before a gruff voice called out to enter.

Upon opening the door, Carl found himself upon the threshold of a luxurious apartment.

Evidently the head of the Stratton banking institution loved his ease.

Business might take him from home a few hours each day, but he could do as good work seated in a comfortable easy-chair as another man could perched on a high stool.

As the young man entered the room, the president glanced up, frowning.

He had given orders that he was not to be intruded upon during this, his busy morning of the month, and could not understand what his cashier could be thinking of to let this man, a stranger, too, enter.

"Good-morning," said Carl, closing the door and deftly locking it.

The president gasped for breath.

Such audacity appalled him.

Then an awful suspicion flashed into his brain. Was he shut in a room with a madman or a desperate robber?

In either case, the situation was enough to freeze the blood in his veins.

He endeavored to be calm, since, perhaps, his life depended on it.

Carl approached him, hat in hand.

"I presume this is Mr. John Hathaway?"

"You are correct, young man," replied the other, as steadily as possible.

"President of this bank?"

"Exactly, sir. What can I do for you?"

"Nothing."

As he spoke, Carl straddled a chair and leaned his arms upon the back.

The fat president looked at him uneasily, as if wondering what could be done in order to get rid of such a dangerous man.

"Why do you come here, then, may I ask?" he finally uttered.

"To do you a favor, sir."

"I do not comprehend."

"Then I shall speak more plainly. You are in the habit of receiving, once a month, a small strong-box, containing ten thousand dollars or more, to be paid out to certain firms?"

"Yes."

"The day on which this box arrives is always the first of the month."

"True."

"This is the day."

"You make no mistake—to-morrow a new month starts in."

"At about eleven-ten this morning, as is customary, a party of armed men, coming in a wagon, will deliver this chest here."

"If they are on time."

"Five minutes later, at eleven-fifteen, several men will enter the bank. One of them will engage the cashier in conversation, while he changes a bill, and, before he knows it, a revolver will be shoved directly under his nose."

"A revolver?"

"And he will be given to understand that a single cry on his part means death."

"Good heavens! And then——"

A second man will leap over the railing and hand the little chest just received, after which the desperadoes will walk out of the door, mount their horses, and be gone away."

"Incredible, sir."

"They have done the same thing before, sir, and will do it again. At Northfield, Minnesota, these men robbed the bank in broad daylight. Kansas knows them, and so does Kentucky."

"Who—are—they?" gasped the bank president, his tongue almost refusing utterance.

"You can guess. There is only one man in all Missouri bold enough to plan and carry out such a scheme. His name is Jesse James."

CHAPTER XIV.

SEALED FOR DELIVERY.

It looked as though the stout president was about to have a sudden stroke of apoplexy—he turned so fiery red in the face when that dreaded name struck his ears.

No moneyed man in all Missouri could hear it without a peculiar chill creeping over his person, for he knew not what hour he might meet the owner of it face to face while traveling in a luxurious Pullman, or seated in his own office.

"That man coming here?" he said, slowly.

"Yes, he is not far away. Before noon arrives he will be riding away with that precious chest fastened to his saddle."

"Perhaps—you—are—he!"

Carl laughed.

"Thanks; but I haven't that honor. Jesse James is no more active enemy in all the world than myself. He helped to murder a relative of mine, one Whitcher, a detective, and I have vowed to be a thorn in his flesh for the rest of my life."

"Then you are—a detective?"

Carl bowed.

"Such is my mission in life, Mr. President. Luckily for you, I got wind of their plans, and have come here to at them at that game, even as I worsted them at another many hours ago."

He felt a relief in the very presence of this man—as though an incubus had been removed from his mind, and though Carl could stand between him and those terrible desperadoes.

"I will send for help," he said.

Carl caught his arm.

"What would you do?" he asked.

"We have a police force here. I can call the chief to bank by this telephone."

"How many men has he under him?"

"Three."

Carl laughed.

Think of four men of that kind standing up before these dare-devils as Rube Burrows and Jesse James!"

"What! Burrows here, too?"

Yes. Make your mind easy and trust it all to me. I will save your strong-box."

"We might close the bank."

Not without creating great excitement, and warning the men that their plan had become known. They are already suspicious, and this would only make them change their tactics. Instead of waiting for the strong-box to reach the bank, they would take their chances with the guards."

The president nodded.

"Leave it all with you, sir, since I see you have a long time. What would you advise?"

"First of all, I must ask some questions."

"But time passes."

"Bah! we have an hour yet. Much can be done in that time."

"Go on."

"In the first place, allow me to introduce myself," and handed the president a letter from the head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, speaking in the highest terms of the bearer, Carl Whicher, who was one of their keenest and most trusted officers.

"This is a satisfactory document, and I feel that for as long as has been very kind to throw you in our way. If you can accomplish the defeat of these rascals, Mr. Whicher, I will see to it that you are substantially rewarded."

"Let us put it in black and white, sir, for that is my business, you know."

The president nodded.

"Like your ways. We will arrange that without delay."

He drew a writing tablet, and, seizing his pen, began to write.

"What would you call a fair remuneration for your services?"

"If I fail, nothing; but, if I succeed in saving your strong-box and all it contains, I think it would be worth five hundred dollars."

The president winced.

"Remember," said Carl, "I risked my life to learn these things, and shall again in endeavoring to save your money."

"I think that is about the fair thing, and shall see that

you get it, if I have to take it out of my own pocket, by Jove!"

A minute later he went on:

"This is to certify that I, John Hathaway, President of the Strattan Bank, agree to pay Carl Whicher, detective, the sum of five hundred dollars, upon condition that through his efforts the strong-box arriving by express on this day is kept from being stolen by Jesse James and his gang."

Carl smiled.

"You have covered the ground entirely, sir. I don't believe I could have gotten up a document more to the point myself. Sign and date it, and I ask for no more."

"That is business from the word go," remarked the stout president, as he leaned over and added the finishing touches to the document.

Carl was satisfied.

He had arranged his side of the case, and all that remained was to do up the other.

Should he succeed as well there, it would be a good day's job.

Straight to the point he went.

"Describe what happens when the strong-box is brought into the bank."

"The men place it on the cashier's desk, with the seal intact; he glances at it, and signs the receipt to that effect. Then the men depart, their part of the business done."

"How long does it remain there on the desk?"

"Perhaps five minutes or so, until the cashier can find time to handle it."

"What do you do with the chest?"

"Empty it."

"And then what becomes of it?"

"Oh, the men take the empty one away."

"Each time?"

"That is their custom."

"You have an empty one on hand now?"

"Certainly."

"Where is it?"

"The cashier has it under his desk, ready to hand over to the express agents."

"Locked?"

"Yes; we have a duplicate key, of course."

"But not sealed?"

"Of course not. Who would seal an empty case?"

"And yet that is just what I am about to ask you to do."

The president looked at him as though he had reason to believe Carl out of his mind.

"Kindly explain," he said.

"Could you retain that empty case to-day without exciting comment?"

"Easily."

"And send it on to-morrow?"

"Any time would do."

"Then we will do so. What would you suppose the contents to weigh?"

The president started.

"Let me see," he mused; "there is considerable silver for paying the hands, but forty to fifty pounds would cover it."

Carl smiled.

"Then we must introduce weight to that extent into the now empty case."

"Ah!"

"Securely lock it, and then place upon it a seal that shall not be broken."

The president smiled.

"I begin to grasp the idea," he said.

"It is time. The case can be kept on hand by the cashier, and as soon as the backs of the men are turned, he must whip the new one off his desk, substituting the other for it."

This time the stout bank official chuckled and rubbed his hands together.

"An elegant plan, by my life."

"When Jesse James and his men enter the bank, and cover the cashier with their revolvers, demanding that he hand over the strong-box, he can allow them to take it."

"They will mount at once and ride away; the whole town will be aroused, and shots must follow them in their flight."

"Your strong-box will be safe, and the bank robber find himself baffled for once."

This picture so pleased the president that he impulsively reached out his hand and grasped that of Carl Whicher.

"Splendid, sir. I am more than pleased."

"In-fighting these men we do not always take notice of the manner in which the battle is won. The end justifies the means. Often, in order to realize something, we are compelled to descend to their methods, however distasteful they may be."

"I know that."

"And in this instance, you see, I have planned to fight fire with fire. Now to get the case and arrange it."

"I will attend to that."

The president touched a bell.

A porter entered.

"Bring me the empty case Mr. Garrison has under his desk—tell him I want it."

In another minute the messenger laid up on the floor a small strong-box, about a foot in length by half that in width.

It was locked.

"That will do, Thomas, for the present. Wait outside; I shall ring for you soon."

When the man had withdrawn, the president took a key from the safe.

With this he unlocked the box.

Of course it was empty.

There was a compartment for silver and gold, and also one for bills.

Carl nodded his head.

"Easily arranged, if we only had some heavy stuff to put in it," he said.

The president chuckled.

"See here, how would that do?"

He waddled across the room, and with some difficulty picked up a bag from the floor.

It was a twenty-five pound sack of drop shot and numbered eight.

"Beautifully, if you had another."

"There is a smaller one in yonder corner. My nephew

left them here, intending to go on a crusade against quail next month."

"Ah! they'll bring down better birds than quail. I see how they fit."

The twenty-five pound bag just filled the niche intended for silver, while the smaller one fitted in the department for gold.

Carl rubbed his hands with delight.

"Specie payment resumed," he laughed.

"Yes, but what would our customers say if they knew we were paying out lead instead of silver and gold?"

Carl snatched up a newspaper, folded it and filled the place kept open for bank notes.

"Might as well have the whole business done," he remarked, smiling.

The case was now ready for closing.

Carl locked it.

"Here is the key, sir."

The president lifted the box.

"Feels exactly like the one that will arrive this morning."

"Good."

"And lacks but one thing."

"The seal?"

"Yes."

"I leave that to your ingenuity to arrange. You are the material handy."

"Oh, yes."

"It will not take you long."

"Say five minutes."

"Then kindly proceed."

The stout official did so.

He placed a strong cord through the fastenings provided for the purpose in the lid and just below it.

Then a taper was lighted, some sealing-wax melted, the cord united with a heavy wad, and as it was cooling a stamp was pressed upon it, leaving a plain seal.

"There, how will that do?" asked the president, wiping his brow with his handkerchief.

"That will deceive him, never fear. We may consider the case won."

CHAPTER XV.

AT ELEVEN-TEN.

The better part of the job had been accomplished, yet there was still something to be done.

Carl glanced at the handsome little clock on the mantel of the president's room.

It lacked ten minutes of eleven.

"Is that clock right?"

"To the minute."

"If the train is on time, then, in twenty minutes express messengers will enter with the little money chest?"

"Yes."

"Can you call the cashier in—I wish to instruct him what he has to do. Is he thoroughly reliable—keep your senses about him?"

"An uncommonly smart fellow—was as cool as a cucumber during the panic and run on the bank some years ago. He can be trusted."

Carl thought there was a considerable difference

between such a situation and having a couple of loaded revolvers aimed at one's head, but he was glad to learn that the cashier was a man of some nerve.

"Call him in, please."

The president gave some signal, and immediately the sheriff entered.

He was speedily put in possession of the facts, and smiled heartily in the plans arranged to defeat the robbers.

All he had to do was to deftly change the strong boxes, concealing the one containing the valuables.

Carl cautioned him to keep his wits about him, lest in the confusion he get the boxes mixed up and give over a wrong one.

This would be a blunder that would be his ruin, and the cashier promised to arrange things so there could be no such accident.

All having been fixed, he went back to his desk, and then the president called in Thomas to carry the box to the front office.

"Only one thing remains," said Carl.

"What is that?"

"You are all fixed in here. I want a few lines to the head of the police force."

The president knew the value of time.

Without asking a question he drew the pad of paper to him, and dashed off a note.

"Will that do?"

Carl read it.

"Nicely. I am off, but will see you again."

"Ten seconds, please. Are you going to chase these fellows?"

"We'll have a try at them."

"Then I may have a chance," taking a double-barrel gun down from the wall and breaking it open. "I expect to be a great Nimrod some years ago, when lighter on my feet. Success to you, Mr. Whicher."

Carl wasted no more time.

Passing through the outer office he made a signal to the cashier, who was waiting on a depositor, and the other entered with a reassuring nod.

Carl was well in that quarter.

Pressing outside, Carl mounted his horse and rode down the street.

He soon came to a building where the head of the town police held out.

A minute he was with the officer.

His worthy had once been a plainsman and a cowboy, and found it more profitable to occupy this snug berth.

Being pressed for time, Carl related his story very briefly.

He impressed the chief deeply.

"I had never run across the James boys as yet, and still know much about them."

"Quickly he weighed the situation."

"We could only get hold of those chaps it would make their life."

"They won't be taken alive, depend on that. We will drop them," said Carl.

"I'll get a horse and hunt up my men."

"So, and remember that you are to be in the neighborhood of the bank."

"What is the exact time?"

"Ten minutes after eleven the box arrives, and within five minutes of that period the James crowd will get to work."

"I'll be there, pard, you bet. Perhaps I can find a way to stop one of the rascals," the chief said, with some significance.

It was evident that he knew how hard it was to kill these tough customers with bullets, and meant to try some other plan.

Carl was satisfied.

He had done all he could.

If the invaders of the town got away with whole skins it would not be his fault.

The time?

Eleven o'clock exactly.

Thus, ten minutes hung upon his hands.

He rode about seeing the streets and making up his mind as to the course which the bank robbers would take after they had, as they believed, secured the treasure.

Thus the time passed.

Vehicles were upon the street.

More than the usual number of people were in town today; it always happened so on the occasion of the pay-box arriving.

Many had come to receive their pay; others to collect debts due from those who would be benefited by the monthly distribution.

Thus Carl attracted no particular attention as he rode along.

He was dressed roughly.

All the while he kept his eyes on the lookout for the parties whom he knew could not be far away.

In riding along he noticed a little squad of horsemen approaching.

Something told him that these were the men he sought.

As they drew nearer he saw that this was indeed the truth.

Of course, it would not do for him to eye them too closely, but he managed to get a good look at them.

First, there was Jesse James.

His soft hat was pulled down over his face, but Carl knew the man.

Riding alongside of him was the tall Alabamian, Rube Burrows.

They looked like many others who came into Stratton from time to time.

What surprised Carl most of all was the presence of the third party.

Behind them rode Marden.

The dwarf's naturally ugly and repulsive face was rendered double hideous because of being marked by a series of scratches, evidently received during his desperate scrimmage with Carl on the preceding night.

He had been wounded in a dozen places, but being as tough as a pine knot, did not seem to mind these small things.

The fact of his riding behind the others would seem to indicate that Marden had been brought along with a certain purpose in view.

He was to hold the horses in readiness while the others went into the bank.

As they came out the alarm would be raised, and at such a time seconds would be worth a great deal to them.

This explained his presence.

Only for such a fact the others would not care to have him present, for he was not an ornament to the crowd.

They were riding leisurely along, with the evident intention to kill a certain amount of time before arriving at the bank.

Carl consulted his watch.

It was almost ten minutes after.

A whistle was heard up the track.

The train, a few minutes late, was drawing near the station.

Soon the time for action would come.

Carl was perfectly cool.

He knew that at least he had laid the train that was to balk the plotters, even should they get away alive.

Events would now follow each other in rapid succession.

It was time for action.

The three men passed the bank.

To have halted in front of it might have excited suspicion, and this was what they wanted to avoid.

After the valuable case was in their possession, they did not care a fig what the town people thought or did, being perfectly independent in the matter.

Next door to the bank was a store.

It was a hardware place.

Reining up in front of it, the two men left their saddles.

As Carl expected, Marden remained in his seat, holding the bridles.

All of the horses faced one way.

They were carefully arranged by the dwarf, so that not a second should be lost by either of the two men when they came out of the bank bearing the coveted box.

Jesse James stepped into the hardware store, as though to make a purchase, but he kept a close watch on Rube Burrows, who lounged in the doorway.

From this point the steps leading up to the door of the bank could be plainly seen.

As yet he was not watching these.

A little commotion down the street had attracted his attention.

He knew what it meant.

The express messengers were on their way from the depot to the bank with the valuable case containing the money.

Burrows' eyes glittered.

His teeth were tightly clenched, and upon his face came a look such as would become a tiger about to spring upon his prey.

As yet Rube had not indulged in any such game as this.

His work in Alabama had been confined to stopping trains and creating a reign of terror around the region where he held out, killing a postmaster for meddling with his mail, and making himself an object of fear through the whole State.

It remained for Jesse James to initiate him into the mysteries of a raid on a bank.

One need hardly say that he took to it like a duck does to water.

It suited his temperament, since he was of a socialist

nature, and believed the good things of this world should be more evenly divided.

As the crowd advanced, Rube saw the two men bearing the strong-box.

Of course, every urchin around followed at their heels while a few men lounging about the depot joined in the procession.

It drew near.

Rube as yet made no signal.

The air was warm, the sun shone, insects droned overhead, and the only sign of any unusual stir was where the express agents and their attendant followers came hurrying along the walk.

They were now close at the foot of the bank steps.

Rube could see what attracted the boys.

The men, for some reason or other, perhaps to show their badge of authority, each carried a revolver in the hand that was not needed in grasping the handle of the strong-box.

These weapons were the magnet that drew the boys around, just as molasses attracts flies.

The men probably enjoyed being heroes for a brief space of time—the observed of all present, and made the most of their fleeting opportunity.

Now they had reached the steps.

They began ascending.

Of course, the crowd fell back and watched them pass beyond the doors of the bank.

The time had come.

Rube turned and raised his arm.

Seeing the signal, Jesse James concluded his trifling purchase within the store.

In a minute he had reached the side of his companions just outside the door.

"Is it time?" he asked.

"Wait. They are just coming out, I reckon.

"You are right. In three minutes we will be on the jump. The door opens—ha! the men come out—look the other way, Rube."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BANK ROBBERY.

Never in all his life had the cashier been more strongly tempted to speak forbidden things than when the two express agents were in the bank.

It seemed strange that he should allow these two armed men, sworn to guard the strong-box with their lives, to depart.

Still, the influence of Carl Whicher was strong upon him, and he refrained.

The men handed over the chest.

He took it in, placed it under his desk, and then, as reconsidering the matter, raised it again to the top.

Then he signed the receipt.

The express agents' work was done.

One of them put out his hand as if to draw the box toward him, doubtless under the impression that it was the empty one they were to take off.

At this the cashier smiled.

He said something in a laughing way, and the men turned to leave.

Perhaps he looked wistfully after them, for he knew that his next experience would be, but he had given his word.

Not by any look or word did he arouse a suspicion in the minds of the two men.

This was as it should be.

They turned and left the bank.

Burrows and his confederate were not paying any attention to them as they came out, and the express agents merely glanced casually that way.

Then they leisurely descended the steps.

They advanced toward the outlaws.

Jesse James kept one eye on them, for he was not the man to let any person get the drop on him.

The agents walked past, merely glancing at the strangers in town.

Then they entered a saloon a few doors above and were out of view.

"Time!"

It was Jesse James who spoke.

He immediately started up the wooden steps of the bank.

Rube Burrows was at his side, his enthusiasm keeping pace with that of the other.

The decisive moment had arrived.

To men who had lived for many years in a whirl of excitement and danger it was nothing beyond the ordinary.

Both were quite cool.

They knew just what they had to do, and went about with the assurance that could only come from long practice.

Such a game was something of a novelty to Burrows, since his former experience had been in a different line.

He went at it, under the guidance of the older outlaw, with the coolness of a veteran.

Having ascended the steps, they came to the doors of the bank.

These they pushed open. The doors hung upon pivot hinges, and could be pushed either way.

Once inside, Jesse James let his eyes fall upon the cashier's desk.

The wire railing had been closed again, but the strong-box stood upon the desk.

Its seal was in plain view.

The cashier appeared to be busily engaged in running over some figures on a slip of paper, and being preoccupied, failed to notice the presence of the two men just inside the railing. At least he appeared not to see them.

Taking up a penknife just then, he laid his hand on the precious package, as if to draw it toward him and cut the seal.

"Hold on!"

The cashier looked up.

His eyes met those of the man just on the other side of the wire barrier.

"Did you speak?"

Considering the fact that he knew he was *vis-a-vis* with a notorious person as Jesse James, the outlaw, it can be said to the credit of the cashier that he maintained his composure to a remarkable degree.

Thus he was able to play his part well.

"Yes, I said hold on. Don't cut that seal," remarked the outlaw.

The cashier frowned.

"I'm not accustomed to joking with strangers," he remarked, bending over the box.

"This is no joke. I say, hold on."

There was a strange clicking sound.

The cashier looked again.

He turned pale.

Through the wire bars a revolver protruded, and was aimed directly at his head.

Many a man before him had lost color and trembled when he found himself covered by the weapon of Jesse James, for he seldom missed his aim, and fired upon slight provocation.

"Don't move a finger, cashier. If you try to drop behind your desk to the floor you'll reach there a dead man. Understand?"

The cashier nodded.

"What does this mean?" he asked, steadily.

"Just this. They have delivered the wrong box here. That one goes up the road. We have come for it."

"Who—are—you?"

"Jesse James and Rube Burrows."

"Good Heavens!"

"If you resist you are a dead man."

"I can do nothing. Gentlemen, have your way," remarked the cashier.

"We generally do. Rube!"

"On deck."

"Mount the railing and lay hold."

It was a singular scene a stout depositor, who came in just then in his shirt sleeves, gazed upon.

One man covering the cashier with a revolver, while a second was climbing over the wire railing on the bank officer's desk.

No wonder the amazed man stood rooted to the spot.

He could not at first comprehend what such gymnastics meant.

Burrows was athletic.

Besides, he happened to be tall and powerful.

It was no effort for him to climb up over the railing.

Bending down he seized the little chest by one of the handles used in handling it.

Without any apparent exertion he swung the weight of fifty pounds up over the railing.

Jesse James lowered it to the floor, at the same time keeping his man covered, as he had an idea the cashier was dangerous.

He took it all so coolly that it gave the outlaw the impression that if such a man had half a show he would drop down, seize a revolver and open fire upon them.

Rube Burrows landed beside the captured case.

He bent over and grasped it.

"All ready, Jesse."

"Then we are off. Good-day, cashier—give the president Jesse James' compliments," with a laugh, as he caught sight of the fat official peering out of his private room, his face marked with both fear and curiosity.

"Call again," said the polite cashier.

"Thanks—we'll consider it. Away we go, Rube, and death to the man who gets in the way."

The two men made a rush for the door.

It happened that the stout depositor in his shirt sleeves, who had come in to make good his bank account, was directly in their path.

Amazed at the startling drama thus presented to his eyes, the man seemed frozen to the spot.

He heard the words of Jesse James and would have given much to have gotten out of the way, but lacked the power to do so.

Consequently Jesse James ran him down, not forgetting to snatch the bills out of his hand, ere tumbling him over, through the door he was holding open.

The fellow found his tongue at any rate, and gave utterance to a shout.

This was the spectacle presented to the eyes of those who chanced to be upon the main street of Strattan, at the hour of eleven-seventeen, and in the vicinity of the bank:

There came through the open door a figure that first of all tried to stand on his head, and failing in this, went rolling down the steps like an acrobat, giving out a whoop with each fresh bump received.

Hardly had he passed through the doorway than a tall, rough-looking man sprang into view. In one hand he carried a small box, which seemed to be quite weighty.

Close behind him another man came.

This party was not so tall as the first, but seemed as active as a cat.

He carried a revolver in his hand, and flourished it above his head in a way that meant business.

A few boys and loungers, having followed the express agents to the bank, still loitered about the foot of the steps.

At sight of these things they set up a howl.

The truth was not immediately comprehended by them, but they saw that something out of the common run was on the tapis, and as is usual with crowds, they were ready to enjoy anything, from a dog fight to the lynching of a negro.

The two outlaws found that they would have to burst through this crowd in order to reach their horses, or else go around.

In the latter case time would be lost.

It would also appear that they were afraid of even such a small gathering, and Jesse James had always been sensitive to anything that looked like fear.

He sprang over the fallen man who lay groaning at the foot of the steps.

Taking a position in front of Rube, he advanced upon the crowd.

"Scatter, you wolves, or I'll doctor you!"

The words alone were enough to frighten ordinary individuals.

Besides, the fierce expression and the threatening revolver did the business.

It was not a valorous crowd.

Boys composed the larger part of it, and the balance were loungers, never known to possess much fighting material.

They scattered.

It reminded Carl of a flock of sheep flying before the coming of the wolf.

Through the lane thus formed, the two bold outlaws dashed.

By this time it must have entered even the dullest mind that they were robbing the Strattan Bank.

Still, not a hand was put out to obstruct their progress. One man knew the party with the revolver.

"It's Jesse James!" he shouted.

The magic of that name was wonderful.

Every man, woman, and child in the State of Missouri had heard of it.

Of course, they entertained different feelings with regard to it, some hating the man as a border terror, and others secretly sympathizing with him because he had fought for the South.

The name was taken up.

From mouth to mouth it ran.

"Jesse James is here!"

Men in the stores heard it, and ran to the doorway to see what was up.

Intense excitement reigned.

Strange, indeed, how such things can impregnate a community with almost the speed of an electric flash.

By this time the two outlaws had swept through the amazed group.

They ran toward the horses.

The dwarf held the animals in readiness, and waited eagerly for their coming.

His ugly face was lighted up with expectancy and excitement.

Such scenes pleased him.

Not a man dared attempt to stop the robbers in their rush.

They reached the horses.

Rube Burrows dropped the case and mounted; this had all been arranged beforehand, and each man knew exactly what he was to do.

Jesse James raised the strong-box and placed it in front of the Alabama outlaw.

Then turning, he sprang upon the back of his own magnificent horse.

CHAPTER XVII.

PLAYED AND LOST.

Thus far all had gone well with the trio of desperate rascals.

Could they continue to manipulate affairs for a little while longer, there need be no fear but what the game would end in their favor.

Once free from the town, and all danger of a chance shot emptying a saddle, they knew the rest was easy enough.

Jesse James was at home in the mountains of Missouri, and could speedily baffle any pursuit that might be made.

The present was what interested them most of all.

No sooner had Jesse James thrown himself upon his steed than Marden let go his hold upon the bridle.

Now it was every man for himself, and the devil take the hindmost.

"Away with you!" shouted Jesse James.

Each horse sprang forward.

In the hand of every rider appeared a revolver, which flourished on high.

They sent out a shout.

A group of cowboys, inflamed with liquor, and invading a Texan town, could not have created more confusion than did these three riders as they galloped along Stratton's main street, whooping fiercely and shooting their weapons in the air.

Stratton was aghast.

In a quiet, orderly town, as a general rule, such goings were scandalous.

When that dreaded name passed around on mysterious tongues, the truth became known, and no one wondered any more.

About the time the three desperadoes urged their horses on, the noise had become so loud as to reach the ears of those who were within the buildings.

As others did, the two express agents ran to the sidewalk.

They saw the three stampeding horsemen galloping past, and would have taken it for granted that these were the Missourians out on a lark, only that the name uttered from the direction of the bank reached them.

"It's Jesse James!" shouted one of the agents.

"Jupiter! look at that tall chap—see what he has in front of him!" whooped the other.

"The strong-box!"

This startling fact came very near paralyzing the two agents.

Then the whole truth burst upon them like a flash—as though a panorama had been suddenly placed before their eyes as they saw the situation.

Men who go armed, naturally think of their weapons at a time like this.

These worthies drew instinctively.

They let fly without much aim, for it is a mere question of chance when it comes to hitting a flying horseman.

Wiser men would have aimed at the horses, and in so doing these, bring their riders into the worst kind of trouble.

There was no time for thought. The bullets sang out the heads of the galloping horsemen, as they came abreast of the men on the sidewalk.

Jesse James glanced that way, for one of the leaden messengers had drawn blood from his hand that grasped the revolver.

He saw who it was thus opening on them, and setting an example that others might follow.

An ugly scowl disfigured his face.

His revolver ceased to whirl above his head, and was dropped to a level.

One, two shots flashed out.

The agents of the express company received the full benefit of the explosion.

One fell over either dead or senseless, while the other stepped on his side, raised himself on one hand, and bravely aiming, continued to fire after the plunging desperadoes as long as his revolver contained a load.

That was a brave man.

Neither of them proved to be fatally hurt, but had narrow escapes.

Jesse James shot to kill when in such a situation, and it was more good fortune than anything else that saved them.

The way was now apparently clear.

Carl had not mounted his horse until the men were in full flight.

Then, springing into the saddle, he started in pursuit.

A strange spectacle it was—one man chasing three desperate rascals.

Now and then Carl fired, but he was not accustomed to shooting from the saddle, and could not render a good accounting.

At the third shot he saw the unlucky dwarf fall forward and almost drop, but clasp his arms around the horse's neck and gradually regain his seat in the saddle.

Jesse James had not noticed this act in the drama, as he was in front, but it had been observed by Rube Burrows.

The latter had secreted his Winchester out of town, and only carried a revolver.

Turning in the saddle, he opened fire on the rash pursuer.

A singular duel was thus fought while the whole party dashed at a breakneck speed.

Carl succeeded in putting a bullet into the arm of the tall bushwhacker, and Rube's third shot struck the detective's horse.

The animal went down as if suddenly killed by a bolt of lightning.

Carl shot over its head, getting a side swing as he went, just escaped having his brains knocked out against a tree, and sailed beautifully into a bush.

Beyond a few scratches, and some holes torn in his clothing, he received no bad effects from his strange flight through space.

Time was consumed in extracting him from his predicament.

When he finally reached the road again, the first squad of roused citizens was coming up, armed with shotguns, muskets, pitchforks, cudgels, and all the paraphernalia indicative of a sudden but heated campaign.

The three outlaws had vanished around a bend in the road.

Pursuit was useless.

At first the indignant and enraged citizens were inclined to look with suspicion on Carl.

He was a stranger there.

They seemed to have an idea that he might be concerned in the robbery.

True, he had chased the fleeing thieves and exchanged many shots with them, but this might be merely a part of the trick.

This sort of men were very slippery, and as full of trick as an egg is of meat.

Who could tell but what this was a set job to shut off all other pursuit.

Perhaps the man had shot his own horse, so as to pose as a hero.

Taking it all in, they were of the opinion that it would be wise to watch this unknown gentleman.

So Carl was sent back to town under guard.

Naturally, they took him to the bank, for a large crowd had assembled there.

Every person in the place seemed to be on the spot.

"Here they come!" shouted a man.

"They've got one of 'em!"

"Hurrah! get a rope, somebody!"

"Here is a good tree for the job!"

Amid such shouts and jeers, Carl was led into their midst and up several of the steps.

He was quite unruffled.

A smile even appeared on his face.

Turning around, he faced the crowd.

"It's him! It's Jesse James!"

A groan went up.

Carl could not help laughing.

"Gentlemen," he said, holding up his hand to indicate silence, "I am sorry to say you have made a mistake. It would please me exceedingly if Jesse James did occupy this spot in your midst, for he is my worst foe."

"That's a lie! You are Jesse James yourself," came a voice.

"On the contrary, I am a detective sent to this region to apprehend that individual. By good fortune I have been able to overhear some of their plans and defeat them."

"Yes, it looks like it, when we all saw 'em get away with the box!" growled one man, whose wages were probably concerned.

Carl turned on him.

"My friend, you shouldn't judge a man until he has had his say. I can prove all I declare by the officers of the bank. See, here is a document, signed by the president, promising to pay me five hundred dollars if I succeeded in saving the strong-box from the hands of the James gang."

"Well, you didn't do it."

"I did do it."

"Why, we seed 'em. What in tarnashun d'ye mean tellin' us we're all blind. Them fellers got away with the box."

"Yes, with a box loaded with two bags of bird shot and a newspaper. Ask the cashier if what I say isn't true."

That worthy had come out upon the upper step, grinning with pleasure.

When attention was thus drawn toward him, he immediately corroborated all that the detective had stated.

The crowd cheered Carl.

"There will be a mad set of men when that box forced open. I believe they've got sand enough to come back and sack the town. It might be advisable to form a guard and close the bank doors, allowing only known persons to enter the building."

"There they come now!" yelled a voice.

The utmost confusion ensued—men swore and women shrieked.

Carl, looking down the road, saw a cloud of dust arising, but made out only a single horseman, so he quieted their fears.

The mere mention of Jesse James' name was enough to cause a panic.

The detective would have given a good deal to have looked in upon the trio of bank robbers when the lid of the strong-box was forced and its contents disclosed.

There must have been a sulphurous odor in the atmosphere around them.

They could guess the author of their woes.

Carl had dropped one of his cards into the box, writing upon it "Compliments of."

The outlaws left that section of the country, as it became too hot for them.

Indeed, the sheriff and his men struck a trail and followed it into the mountains.

The outlaws became separated by accident, and Rufus Burrows escaped capture by an exceedingly close shave.

It startled him so much that he determined to shake the dust of Missouri off his feet, and go back to Alabama again.

Carl Whicher had found a new game to play, and as he never went into anything by halves, he now devoted himself to making love with all his might and main.

He had a clear field, and soon won Susie's consent to be his wife, the old squire having already given in.

Major Prentice recovered, a changed man, and he since made an honorable name for himself in the South. His mother is the proudest and happiest old lady in New Orleans, but even she never knew how close a shave was with her boy.

Carl and Susie were married in the spring, and the former gave up the detective business. A bad vow is better broken than kept, and Carl's wife led him to see that vengeance belonged to a higher power than his weak arm.

THE END.

Next week's JESSE JAMES STORIES (No. 8) will contain "Jesse James' Daring Deed; or, The Raid on the Pike Ridge Jail."

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